The Logics of Deflation: Autonomy, Negation and the Avant-Garde

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Wolverhampton for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2005

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Date 3/11/05

Abstract

This thesis by publication, *The Logics of Deflation: Autonomy, Negation and the Avant-Garde*, collects essays recently published in various journals (*Radical Philosophy, Historical Materialism, Oxford Art Journal, Third Text)* and in museum publications. The publications address a number of key issues affecting the production and interpretation of contemporary art and the 'everyday', art's institutionalization and art's autonomy, the role of the avant-garde after postmodernism, the meaning of conceptual art, performativity and authorship, art's relationship to popular culture, and the crisis of the 'politics of representation'.

The central argument of the thesis is that when art abandons the possibility of the 'new' art falls back into heteronomy and the academic. As such, there can be no renewal of art without it resisting, negating, reworking, what has become tradition. But this link between the 'new' and value should not be confused with conventional modernist notions of formal 'advance' or supersession in art. Rather, the 'new' here, I argue, is the restless, ever vigilant positioning of art's critical relationship to its own traditions of intellectual and cultural administration. The mistake postmodernism and contemporary critics of the avant-garde make, therefore, is that they identify art's claims to autonomy not with art's necessary reflection on its own conditions of possibility, but with simplistic notions of elitism and formalism. As a consequence autonomy is treated undialectically. Following Adorno's notion of autonomy in art as a social relation between art's production and reception, I insist, that for art to continue to define itself as modern it is inescapably bound up with the negation of the institutional arrangements and traditions in which it finds itself. Indeed, there can be no critical future for art without this temporal experience of art as being 'out of joint' with the traditions and institutions which have brought it into being. The content of art continues to be implicated in the mediation of the critique of the

category of art.

Looking at conceptual art as a defining moment of this logic I defend the changing anti-art strategies of modern and contemporary art practice - in particular British and American art of the 1990s - as the means by which art has recently pursued this double process of negation and self-negation. In this way it is the continuous redefinition of the boundaries of anti-art which forms the basis by which art negates what has been previously designated autonomous in order to constitute autonomy in art anew.

In conclusion the thesis links this process of negation and self-negation to the idea of the avant-garde as a kind of placeholder for art's autonomy. In other words, I claim that the avant-garde is another name for the possibility of art's continuing self-realization under the instrumentalizing force of the commodity-form. Bridging philosophy, art history and art theory, this thesis repoliticizes the issue of autonomy and the avant-garde.

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Introduction: Art and Its Negations

Prologue

In August 1993 I visited a massive installation at the Battlebridge Centre in King's Cross, the site of a former bus depot. I had been encouraged to go there having met one of the artists involved. He had written to me asking for a letter of support in order that he and the other artists in the group he was part of could raise money and gain access to the site. As I walked through the entrance, what was immediately entrancing about the installation was its ingenuity and sheer scale: it stretched almost to the length of a football pitch, and invited a mazy walk through its geometric interior. At the entrance it was impossible to see the installation's furthermost point. The artists had built, out of hundreds of cardboard packing boxes, a crude approximation of an city-centre environment, each cluster of boxes standing alone as an architectural feature. Some of these reached almost to the ceiling, some were flat like a minimalist floor sculpture. Suspended from the ceiling between these simple architectural forms were eighteen large painted canvases. These images, as the press release put it, ranged "from the now almost forgotten media events of the eighties and nineties, through the push of commercial interests that explored a new freedom and individualism"; and were painted by members of the group and invited artists. The images included the Docklands development, an Eternity perfume advert, an Aids awareness benefit concert, a Keith Haring, Princess Di and a Somalian child, Bernard Tschumi's deconstructionist development 'Parc de Villete', Terry Farrell's Charing Cross development, and a Body Shop cartoon. The urbanist irony of the work was familiar from the large body of critical postmodernist work

on the representations of modernity in the 1980s. Its transmutation of capitalist accumulation into an image of pasteboard transience (at the time the London homeless's cardboard city still occupied an underpass at Waterloo station) mocked the speculative property frenzy of the late eighties and early nineties. In this the work touched on the 'architectural turn' in the critique of modernist hubris in much US and European eighties art.[1] Yet, for all its indebtedness to critical postmodernism the installation had a lightness in its execution and perverse disregard for the paintings exhibited (they were merely 'decorative' intrusions) that made it stand out. I was impressed. In fact, I was more than impressed I sensed that something had coalesced here and that it chimed with my own frustrations with the art of the moment. For the location and the form of the installation established a certain tone of disregard: it set its face against late modernist implacability as all serious art had been doing in the eighties, but it also set its face against the dominant form of this implacability: photo-text neo-conceptualism. Inert paintings-by-numbers and the stagy arrangement of stacked boxes were not going to win many friends in the world of lens-based assiduousness, or for that matter, in the burgeoning area of the archeological ready-made. There was something slightly impertinent and underperformed about the work. Neither a collection of first-order paintings nor a sculptural installation of ambition, or, significantly, a reflection on the violence of the spectacle in the found materials and the media of the spectacle (perhaps *the* central criterion of seriousness of the art of the 1980s), its relationship to its materials was self-consciously clunky and autistic.

This impressive work was 'Natural History', the first of a number of elaborate, extensive and humorous installations produced by the group Bank in the 1990s; and directly memorable for their narrative re-presentation of both their own work and the work of other artists. Indeed the palpable disregard for the ideal viewing conditions of their own art and the art of others came to define what was

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[1] For example Tom Lawson, Laurie Simmonds and Richard Prince.

engaging about their work in the mid-1990s, and what made the work stand out for me at Battlebridge. The work had absorbed the lessons of conceptual art, it clearly had a politics, it was maliciously ironic, yet it didn't do what advanced art was supposed to do: present ideas of theoretical high-seriousness, with clarity of form and authorship in pure-white spaces. On the contrary, the installations were messy, disputatious, ugly, composite things, deliberately confusing the work of invited artists with the collective work of the group, and the work on the walls with the installation itself. The titles of the shows were a kind of give away: 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', 'Zombie Golf', 'Cocaine Orgasm'. Moreover, these shows were presented in dilapidated (non-art) spaces run by the artists themselves. Work, group-authorship and exhibition space became indivisible, in an echo of 1960s art collectives.

At their space at Burbage House in Curtain Road on the edge of the City and then at the galleries Dog and Poo Poo in Underwood Street, close by, Bank established a profound shift in the dominant viewing habits of art for a younger generation of artists in London.[2] Making art without clearly defined boundaries of authorship in spaces that were self-run, and that made no concessions to publicly funded notions of radical practice, they reintroduced notions of delinquency and disorder into critical practice, revealing how much of the official advanced and critical art of the period had come to settle into habit and self-regard. In a climate of artworld identity politics and deconstructionist propriety this was invigorating, and I began to follow what they were doing, eventually writing about their work and even contributing (anonymously) to their scurrilous and riotously funny satirical art magazine *The Bank* ('You Can Bank On US! Beauty, Integrity,

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[2] Interestingly, I, along with my co-organizer, David Goldenberg, rented the space at Burbage House for two months in January 1996 from Bank after the group had vacated it, in order to install our artists-work-for-answering machines *50x50x50x50*. The space is now an office, just as Curtain Road and the surrounding area, so central to the emergence of the new art in the mid-1990s with its cheap rents and semi-derelict properties, is now thoroughly established with bars and clubs.

Interrelations).[3] I also began to immerse myself in the emerging young London art scene, of which Bank space, was beginning to play a defining role. This was something I had not done with any enthusiasm since the mid-1980s. In 1994 I published an edited collection *Art has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art,* a wide-ranging assessment of the new radical histories of art and contemporary critical practices which had come to dominate the teaching of art history during the 1980s.[4] One of the themes of my introduction was how smoothly self-sufficient this New Art History and these critical practices had become, and as a consequence, how generally undertheorized the defence of the interrelationship between theory and practice now was for a late 60s generation that had entered the professorate, and who were busily preoccupied with the institutional status of post-conceptual critical practice. The new art in London provided a focus for these problems, as a new generation of artists began to emerge who paid little respect to the model of artist-intellectual which had underwritten the ambitions of so much post-conceptual art in the 1980s. The new work opened other ways of being critically engaged and responsible in art.

As such, this moment of localized dissent offered a way of being able to think through what had emerged for me as the increasing problem of the institutionalization of the critique of modernism in critical postmodernism in the early 1990s. The critique of representation, of identity, of artistic autonomy, of

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[3] See, John Roberts, 'Mad for It! Bank and the New British Art', *Everything* Magazine, No 18 Jan 1996. *Everything*, an artists' run magazine, was an important (and sardonic) forum for the discussion of the new British art in the mid-1990s, and also a space for younger artists to present new work. A good indication of the tenor of the magazine was the free gift in issue No18: a fake LSD tab in a tiny plastic bag. *Everything* was the only magazine that existed critically *within* the space of yba. The 'Mad for It!' , article generated a flurry of debate. See in particular, Stewart Home, 'The Art of Chauvinism in Britain and France', *Everything*, No 19 March 1996, Dave Beech, 'Chill Out', *Everything*, No 20, July 1996, Paula Smithard, 'Grabbing the Phallus By the Balls: Recent Art By Women', *Everything*, No 21, Jan 1997. See also my reply to Home, 'Home 'truths'', *Everything*, No 20 July 1996, and 'Taking Stock', *Everything*,Vol 2 Issue 1, March 1997.

[4] John Roberts, ed., *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, Verso, 1994

the art institution - key themes of the assault on modernism in 1980s critical postmodernism - were now official academic positions.[5] The issue for a younger generation of artists, then, was not so much how these 'freedoms' might be put into action, but how the autonomy of artists might be renewed in the face of the academicization of critique in advanced art. The rapid dissemination of the 'new theory' meant that younger artists not only had to find their way through the critique of modernism but through the orthodoxies of critical postmodernism itself. This issue had been on my critical radar since the mid-eighties when I began to take my distance from the counter-hegemonic model of critical practice in critical postmodernism (largely post-Althusserian in origins) in favour of a return to the issue of autonomy in Adorno. What was important about Adorno's model of autonomy - autonomy for Adorno was another name for Hegelian self-reflection and not an expression of art's social transcendence - was that it allowed for a defence of art against heteronomous notions of art as social practice from within the space of art *as* social practice. In short, it was a dialectical model of art's political relationship to its conditions of production and reception, and not a code word for artistic quietude, elitism, and formalism. In this, it enabled a defence of the 'politics of art' to avoid the problems of political substitutionalism which had seemed to beset the whole history of art's politicization from the WW1 and Berlin Dada onwards. For Adorno the idea that particular kinds of social location and critical content in art might secure art's effectivity, always failed to address how such moves tended to produce an instrumentalization of art's form and use-values.[6] Art's materials, its sensuous manifestation in the world of things

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[5] By this I mean the extensive literature on the 'critique of representation' in the wake of Hal Foster's edited anthology, *Postmodern Culture,* Bay Press, 1983. By the early 1990s such a critique was well established in many art schools, art history and cultural studies departments in the US and Britain, in loose alliance with the new identity politics. See for example, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Tinh T.Minh-ha and Cornel West, with a foreward by Marcia Tucker and images selected by Félix González-Torres, The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT, 1990.

[6] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984

not like art, was always subject to external criteria of success, to the world of things not like art. Hence for Adorno, once art's politicization is harnessed to audience requirements, its internal development is frozen into predigested themes and expectations. This could only lead to self-censorship and a sentimentalized understanding of art's possible claims on truth. In other words Adorno's concept of autonomy and defence of modernism - as principle of self-development - was, an attack, precisely, on that section of the cultural left that believed that after late modernism, all art needed to be free of the market and art institution was to insert itself in 'everyday life'. Adorno's writings on autonomy were a powerful way of countering the idealist tendencies of this transformative model of art's praxis. Adorno, therefore, sought to restore the necessary negative content of art under the commodity form. That is, if art's relationship to freedom was not just a matter of the formal representation of emancipatory content, then art's use of its inherited materials must emerge from the pressures of heteronomous thinking itself. If art was still to have a transformative bearing on those materials, art's relationship to its audience and to its own histories must remain fundamentally one of renunciation and asociality. There could be no possibility of art's renewal without art being 'out of joint' with the circumstances and traditions in which it finds itself. In this sense Adorno's sensitivity to the issue of autonomy allowed the politicization of art's form (that is, its critique of heteronomy) to coincide, or at least make tentative alliance, with an anti-Stalinist cultural politics that was in fact quite alien to Adorno's critical theory, and thereby redress the political limitations of Adorno: non academic Trotskyism. In similar dark times, Trotsky had also defended the autonomy of art against art's instrumentralization, and like Adorno had made important alliances with artists for direct political reasons.[7] In this way, the Adorno-Trotsky alliance was an important critical resource in the late eighties for a generation of British art historians, art critics and cultural theorists who had been formed politically by non-orthodox Trotskyism, myself

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[7] See John Roberts, *Postmodernism, Politics and Art*, Manchester University Press, 1990, pp18-23

included.[8] Adorno's and Trotsky's emphasis on the renunciative content of Marx - that is the break with the form of capitalist relations - allowed the relationship between autonomy and negation to be sustained as an immanent problem of art's form, and not, contrary to the assertions of postmodernism, a redundant expression of modernist teleology.[9]

The problem of negation in art, though, was not something I addressed seriously until the mid-1990s when I began reading Hegel intensely for the first time.[10] In this respect *Art Has No History!* is decidedly transitional. On the one hand my introduction develops an Adornoite negation of critical postmodernism as the best way of keeping the category of art open and attending to the art object, yet on the

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[8] Non-orthodox Trotskyism emphasizes a state-capitalist analysis of the old Soviet Union rather than a degenerated worker's state position as in Trotsky, and dissents from Trotsky's late apocalyptic writings about the fundamental crisis of capitalism. The Adorno-Trotsky milieu is yet to be framed and analysed, but nevertheless its extensive impact on art history, cultural theory and studio practice in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s is indisputable. Although many of the following writers and artist-writers would, no doubt, not sign themselves up as fully paid up members of this milieu - some clearly owe more to Adorno than Trotsky, some more to Trotsky as a friend of modernism than Adorno as a theorist of art's autonomy - they all have worked in its sphere of influence: Caroline Arscott, Fred Orton, Mike Baldwin and Mel Ramsden of Art & Language, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie, Gail Day, David Batchelor, Terry Atkinson, Ben Watson, Paul Wood, Steve Edwards. This represents a sizable and significant cross-section of the art-theoretical left of the period; and it has produced many fruitful exchanges and joint-projects between its participants. We might contrast this with the use of Adorno in the American academy in the late 80s and 90s (overall a weaker presence than in Britain and Europe), where his work has tended to be confined to a conservative reading of the Frankfurt School, and as such limited to historical debates on philosophical aesthetics, with the exception perhaps of Jameson (although Jameson's Adorno is very distant from the vicissitudes of artistic practice). In Britain Adorno was a way of marking out an ambitious anti-Stalinist, Marxist cultural space in the face of the generalized onslaught of postmodernist modes. The study of the way in which Adorno was read in Britain against the grain of his leftist detractors, would be a worthy research project.

[9] I developed this Adorno-Trotsky alliance in my work on realism and painting in the early 1990s. See 'Approaches to Realism', Bluecoat Gallery publications, 1990. Reprinted in *Selected Errors Writings on Art and Politics, 1981-1990*, Pluto Press 1993.

[10] Here, it is important to acknowledge my conversations with Gail Day. Day's work on Hegel - through T.J. Clark and Paul de Man - was a source of stimulation. De Man, in particular, became a stalking horse for what kind of Hegel might be worthy of Hegel's legacy.

other hand its historical materialism is very anti-Hegelian; now reading it again, embarrassingly so. This omission mostly had to do with the two major formations of my intellectual development during the 1980s: British philosophical realism (in particular Roy Bhaskar and David-Hillel Ruben)[11] which tended to see Marxism as closer to natural science than to dialectical theory, and Anglo-American analytical philosophy, in particular language philosophy (John Searle and Donald Davidson).[12] My Adornoite-Trotsky-philosophical realist framework tended to be 'filled' out with analytical reflections on 'intention', 'agency' and 'representation'. Being, ontology, determinate negation were not things that entered this analytical landscape - well, not in any conscious and formed way. In this sense the second half of the 1990s was an attempt on my part to become a better student of Hegel - and by doing so a better theorist of the artistic subject - given the imperative of thinking through the problems of negation in art and culture without just rehearsing an Adornoite position. It is worth mentioning here another transitional text that I published in the same year as *Art Has No History!* : 'Muntage, Dialectica i Facultació/Montage, Dialectics and Empowerment'.

This essay was written for an extensive show of photo-based critical practice, *Domini públic/Public Domain*, at the SantaMóniCA museum in Barcelona.[13] The exhibition contained many leading critical postmodernists of the period (Gran Fury, the Guerrilla Girls, Mitra Tabrizian, Dan Graham), and, as in many other museum shows of the time emphasized the importance of institutional critique and identity politics to critical postmodernism. My essay rehearsed the political

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[11] See in particular, Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, Leeds Books, 1975, and David-Hillel Ruben, *Marxism and Materialism: A Study in Marxist Theory of Knowledge*, Harvester Press, 1975

[12] See John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in The Philosophy of Mind*, Cambidge University Press, 1983, and Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 1984

[13] John Roberts,'Muntage, Dialectica i Facultació/Montage, Dialectics and Empowerment', in *Domini públic/Public Domain*, SantaMóniCA museum, Barcelona, 1994

formation of this politicized post-conceptual work in relation to a discussion of montage and dialectics in early avant-garde film and photography. My understanding of the neo-avant-garde extension of this tradition, though, was more sceptical than that of the organizers, and indeed, I ended up taking my distance from the institutional-critique model of practice, which, in the work Dan Graham, Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke and Michael Asher, largely dominated the framework of critical postmodernism.[14] I did this by stressing the need for a model of the politics of representation which moved beyond the simple inclusion of the popular or non-specialist spectator. At the time Haacke talked about this inclusion as involving a process of empowerment for the non-specialist spectator. [15] As he argued a few years later: "If one pays attention to the forms and language that are accessible to an uninitiated public, one can discover things that could enrich the esoteric repertoire."[16] However, for all Haacke's and other artists' (Fred Wilson, Alfredo Jarr, Renee Green) work on unpacking professional forms of attention, this process of inclusion invariably failed to acknowledge the conflictual realities of the "uninitiated" spectator: that is, what is excluded is not necessarily waiting to be included, or rather waiting to be included on the terms set by those doing the including. In this regard the inclusive 'popular' spectator of professionalized critical postmodernism always appeared to be a product of the phantasies of the artist and art institution, and bore little relationship to the consciousness of actual culturally excluded spectators. Indeed, the failure of this phantasized popular spectator to have any empirical basis in class-relations was the very basis of Adorno's critique of notions of political accessibility. This is because such a position is unable to recognise both the resistance *to* the received notion of culture on the part of of the culturally excluded spectator, and at the

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[14] See Benjamin H.Buchloh, *Neo-Avant garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, MIT, 2003

[15] See, Hans Haacke, 'A Conversation with Hans Haacke', by Yve-Alain Bois, Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss, in *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, MIT Press 1987. See also Tom Crow, 'The Simple Life', *October* No 63 Winter 1993

[16] Hans Haacke and Pierre Bourdieu, *Free Exchange*, Polity Press, 1995, p107

same time, the actual critical intelligence of this spectator, his or her desire for *self-transformation.*, (although this is not to say that this dialectic is ever made explicit in Adorno).There was an important debate to be had, therefore, about representation and cultural and social division that didn't turn one-dimensionally on questions of accessibility, but on the *uses* and *interpretation* of art 'from below'. The emphasis on non-specialist forms of attention of art as a possible *reflective* disturbance of high-culture, was a way of breaking with what I saw as the professionalization of the politics of representation 'from above' within the area of postmodernist institutional critique. As such, this was not an argument about the 'effectivity' of art outside the institution (which I don't hold to in any absolute sense), but rather about the limits of the popular prevailing in currents definitions of critical practice. As I outlined in 'Montage, Dialectics and Empowerment', cultural democracy does not begin simply when the spectator feels included in the world of art, but when the claims of the art are "brought into dispute and *use* by the non-specialist". [17] The ideal horizon for any 'politics of representation' does not end with what is presented as critically meaningful to the spectator, but whether art and spectator engage in a process of equal exchange at the point of reception. The importance of artistic form as political issue in Adorno, then, is related to the way forms of critical attentiveness are central to spectatorship as a self-transformative process. Cultural democracy can only issue in actual collective participation from below through such a process, and not through a discourse of popular (and passive) inclusion. Accordingly, this process of participation of necessity involves the dismantling of the meanings of dominating by the dominated.

During this period, these arguments become singularly important to my development as a writer. For a rhetorics of emancipation seemed to dominate the reception of the new critical postmodernism without any reference to social and

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[17] John Roberts, 'Muntage, dialectica i facultació', in *Domini públic*,SantaMóniCA museum, Barcelona, 1994, p30.

cultural division and the actual consciousness of those supposedly to be included in the new benighted postmodern audience of art. In 1990 I had met the artist Dave Beech when he was one half of the artist duo Inter Alia with Mark Hutchinson (he had read an essay I had written on Art & Language and sought me out) and in the following two years we began to share our ideas and concerns about these issues. Like myself, Beech saw the construction of a popular or inclusive spectator in critical postmodernism as a fundamental exclusion of class subjectivities in the formation of a postmodernist cultural democracy.[18] Beech began to do some writing on the subjectivity of power and cultural exclusion, which became the spectral figure of the 'philistine', and eventually our collaboration developed into a full blown project on philistinism itself. Working with artists has always played a big part in my writing: in many ways my principal site of production was the art school and artworld in the 1980s and 1990s, just as it is today, although the philosophy conference and seminar room has perhaps tended to take over from the machinations of the artworld proper.[19] The collaboration with Dave Beech, therefore, was not just a philosophical reflection on the 'politics of representation' but a confrontation between the problems of studio practice and the wider conditions of art's production and reception. In this sense it could not have been written without bringing the philosophical demands and problems Adorno highlighted into alignment with the problems of contemporary practice. We used an Adornian philosophy to break down the self-image of prevailing practices, and the possibility of other practices

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[18] At the time I was also working on problems relating to class, photography and representation. How is it possible to think photography in relation to the representation of class *subjectivity*? See the discussion of the amateur below. John Roberts 'Class, Modernity and Photography', in *Renegotiations: Class, Modernity and Photography*, Norwich Gallery, 1993

[19] From 1995-1997 I was working as the curator at Camerawork Gallery, London. It was here that I did the majority of my writing on conceptual art and photography, which became the exhibition and book, *The Impossible Document*. (1997)For a discussion of my tenure there in relation to the emerging British art of the 1990s, see John Roberts interviewed by Jorge Ribalta, in ed, Jorge Ribalta, *Servicio Público: Conversaciones sobre financiación pública y arte contemporáneo*, Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1998

to break down the (modernist) self-image of contemporary philosophy. [20] This meant, for my writing at least, that any kind of dialectical theory worth its salt had to embark on a reassessment of the prevailing or approved categories of art theory and art criticism. So, just as the ideal of the popular spectator needed to be qualified by the actualities of social and cultural division, terms such as the avant-garde and autonomy needed to be rethought against the grain of their conservative postmodern assimilation or dismissal.

This relationship between the reflective requirements of philosophical discourse and the corrective demands of actual practices, is what marks out the body of writing in this PhD thesis. In this it is the culmination of an extended process of thinking about how contemporary art and the self-reflective demands of philosophy can live with each other. It is the abiding strength of Adorno's writing on art that it is *contemporary* art - the art which has emerged from tradition, from heteronomy - that has to guide the demands of value and judgement. Thus a recognition of the novel in art is not simply a defence of the new for the sake of the new, but the space where the autonomy and renewal of art is to be defined and struggled over. Without this speculative leap, this risk of identification with what remains unmarked, there can be no defence of art as a space of freedom, of autonomy. This thesis, then, sits very much within this philosophical tradition as a defence of the unknown as the place where we come to transform our relationship to the known in order to reflect on what we think we know.

Autonomy and the avant-garde

This thesis – 'Logics of Deflation: Autonomy, Negation and the Avant-Garde' - brings together essays published in various journals and museum and gallery publications since the late 1990s. As such the chapters included here reflect a variety of sites of production across the academic, magazine publishing and the

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[20] See Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso 2002

artworld, bringing different theoretical demands to bear on my writing. However, if these essays have different origins and possess different voices, they all share the same terrain of enquiry: how is it possible to 'think' art after Conceptual art and thereby think the meaning of art's continuing emergence? How, and with what, is art to be made, not just after modernism's assimilation of the readymade, but after the systematization and dispersal of the ready made as *a mode of production*? What skills and values might artists bring to the work of art when the labour involved in the work of art is no longer reliant on any, or very limited, traditional craft skills, when, indeed, many artists chose to absent themselves from the physical production of the work altogether? In this respect, the central argument of this thesis is that the defence of autonomy is fundamentally a question of how value is connected to the relations between skill, deskilling and reskilling.

For aesthetic conservatives in the 20th and 21st century the reign of the dissolution of form and the rise of the readymade (assemblage, photography, post-object aesthetics generally) has been seen as one long drawn out diversion from classical values of proportion, harmony and hand-based craftsmanship. Indeed, some conservatives hold out that this tradition of negation is a mere historical rupture, linked to the divisive rise of cultural pluralism and technology under capitalism, and that its life under capitalism is limited.[21] Admittedly, this conservative classicism is largely a minor position these days, even on the right, but nevertheless, there remains a widespread view that somehow the negations of art might, and can, stop. All that prevents these negations from ending is a change in attitude amongst artists, critics, and particularly museums (the heart of all the corruption) who, in egregious opposition to their traditional role, openly support art in defiance of what people actually want. Attached to this conservative classicism is a liberal sanguinity that the history of the modern will eventually

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[21] See for example, Hilton Kramer, ed., *The New Criterion Reader: The First Five Years*, New York, 1988

play itself out, or will fall into line if other kinds of critical persuasion are brought to bear, as if the modern in art was susceptible to some kind of kindly cultural therapy.

Art's tradition of negation persists though. It persists because negation persists, because negation in art is what of necessity mediates skill (or lack of skill), form and meaning. And what drives this negation is the very 'asociality' of art under capitalism, the fact that for art to remain art (rather than transform itself into design, fashion or social theory) it must experience itself as being 'out of joint' both with its place in the world and within its own traditions. In fact being 'out of joint' with one means being 'out of joint' with the other. For without this drive to autonomy art would simply cease to exist as a tradition of aesthetic and intellectual achievement and, more importantly, as a means of resistance to the heteronomy of capitalist exchange. This is why this tradition of negation continues to produce work of value and quality, despite the crisis of the original avant-garde and the dispersal and assimilation of modernism, and despite art's constant submission to the demands of entertainment and commerce and institutional legitimation. Art is irreducible to its own histories and to the heteronomous forces of capitalist exchange because art is that which *starts* from a position of negation. (See Chapter 1 'After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, and Critique').

However, to see art as an irreducible force of negation, is not to deny that the practices and institutions of art under late capitalism are in irrevocable crisis, and that culture is in a state of fundamental decline. To defend the dynamic logic of negation is not thereby to cast art adrift from its social constraints. In fact both are interdependent. Under commodity culture the substantive decline of culture and the critical renewal of art are interwoven within the history of modernism and the modern. Far from being that which damns art to absolute dissolution, cultural decline is the very ground of modern art's unfolding and reinvention. This means

that the experience and mediation of decline is indivisible from the judgements of value and critical materials that art is able to bring to bear on its own traditions and representation of the world. Thus, even in an epoch of decline the cognitive demands and the openness to meaning of art are not in *themselves* in desuetude. For if this was so this would imply that at some previous point the alienated conditions of art's production and reception were somehow richer and more perspicacious than the alienated conditions of art's production now or yesterday. On these grounds - in order to defend art against the critics of its dissolution - we should look for quality and value in periods of relative social stability, for it is there we are likely to find works of high quality. This is plainly absurd. In fact, the negations of art are continually able to reanimate themselves because the negations of art are inexhaustible so long as asociality remains the underlying dynamic of art's production, and human beings are capable of finding meaning in this dynamism. To assume otherwise is to believe that asociality is a discrete product of the art - the result of what artists *claim* to experience - and not the basis under which the conditions of art, irrespective of the particular ideologies professed by artists, are produced and enter social relations.

Thus, there is a general historical principle at stake here: the decadence or decline of a culture is certainly not irrelevant to how art's conditions of production are able to reproduce themselves, but it has little bearing on the value and quality of the art produced. What truly affects the quality of art is art's direct repression or coercive intervention and censorship by the state. When art is driven *out of production*, then clearly the motor of art's social negation is also driven into reverse. But even without the public transmission of art's value, the negations of art may not even stop there. Even in the most culturally impoverished circumstances and clandestine conditions of existence art becomes a focus for the contradictions and alienations of social experience. Art's negations, therefore, are not something that art touches lightly on, but that which secures art's conditions of visibility and autonomy. It is that which gives shape to its unfolding.

This collection is a defence of this tradition of negation and of the negative. As such the central argument of my thesis is that when art abandons the possibility of the 'new' it falls back into heteronomy and the academic. In this way there can be no renewal of art without art resisting, reworking, dissolving what has become tradition, what has become heteronomous. But this link between the 'new' and value should not be confused with conventional modernist notions of formal 'advance' or supersession in art or, nihilistically, with the destruction of tradition *tout court*. Rather, the 'new' here is the restless, ever *vigilant positioning* of art's critical relationship to its own traditions of intellectual and cultural administration. The mistake postmodernism and contemporary critics of the avant-garde make, therefore, is that they identify art's claim to autonomy not with art's necessary reflection on its own conditions of possibility, but with simplistic notions of elitism and historicism.[22] As a consequence autonomy is treated undialectically.

Following Adorno's notion of autonomy in art as a *social relation* between art's production and reception, I argue, that for art to define itself as modern, it is bound up inescapably with the negation of the institutional arrangements, social circumstances and traditions in which it finds itself. There can be no critical future for art without this experience of disjunction, of art being 'out of joint' with the traditions and institutions which have brought it into being. The content of art continues to be implicated in the mediation of the critique of art as a category. Thus, key to a defence of this tradition of negation is the continuing possibility of the avant-garde.

The avant-garde is currently much maligned and misunderstood. Treated, overwhelmingly, as an historical category by conservatives and postmodernists

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[22] See, for example, Hal Foster ed., *Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, 1983

alike in the wake of the demise of the original avant-gardes, its continuing dynamism and critical content has been either denied or foreshortened. Indeed in Britain and the US in the 1980s and 1990s it suffered from either caricature or enfeeblement. However, as Marjorie Perloff has argued:

if we take the term "avant-garde" more narrowly and literally as the advance guard of the army, that flank of artists who are in the forefront, and hence, as the cliché would have it, "ahead of their time," avant-garde art continues to be a reality. There is no reason to believe, in other words, that radical art practices will not continue to manifest themselves (often where least expected), even as their gradual assimilation into mainstream culture will not necessarily ensure their commodification.[23]

In other words, there is a world of difference between the artwork entering the culture and being assimilated into critical discourse, and the artwork coming to speak *for* the interests of the dominant culture, that is, finding an identity with it. On this basis much historical and recent avant-garde art is clearly not assimilable to the interests of bourgeois culture. We need to distinguish, then, between very different senses of assimilation here - between notions of acceptance, tolerance, incorporation and assent. Certain works and practices are obviously tolerated and accepted, but nevertheless the culture finds it hard, or even impossible, to give *assent* to their content. In this way certain avant-garde practices remain lodged in renunciative spaces, spaces that capitalism finds too difficult to penetrate and mediate. The complacent notion that high culture and popular culture now share an identical space (of pleasures and artistic ambition) is, therefore, wholly misguided. This is because the would-be erosion of the distinctions between high and low is invariably presented from the point of view of the popular assimilation of high-cultural form, rather than from the perspective of avant-garde works

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[23] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p201

themselves, which on closer inspection reveal real levels of discord and dissent from the expectations of the popular text (at the same time as incorporating and transforming the popular text). The avant-garde continues to exert its renunciative force even in conditions of (partial) assimilation and general marginalization. It is more fruitful to look at the avant-garde as a kind of residual placeholder for art's autonomy and, as such, it is better understood as a spatial concept rather than as a supersessive procession of formalized groups or movements.

The avant-garde after avant-gard*ism* is that space of relations across practices and disciplines where artists, writers and intellectuals, test, and probe the historical and self-normalizing conditions of the category of art, a space in which the conditions of art's asociality are continuously brought to self-consciousness. In this sense the avant-garde is another name for the possibility of art's continuing self-realization under the instrumentalizing forces of the commodity-form and the art institution, and, concomitantly, the site where critical thinking on art meets and coalesces. Consequently, it will tend to be formed in those centres where the critique of prevailing practices have a chance of critical legitimation based on prior critical (avant-garde) practice. It is a space, then, that continuously shifts cultural and national location and personnel. Moreover, the practices internal to this cross-cultural space, and which seek to prevail within this space, will not necessarily share the same social and political perspectives. It is a space that not only shifts cultural and national location and personnel continuously, but is, in intra-artistic terms, unstable and conflictual.

Crucial to the bringing into self-consciousness of the asociality of art is how these various claims on art's negation and self-negation produces the 'new'. If the new is not simply that which coheres to produce a distinct, founding, collective *style*, (after the demise of the great modernist stylistic transformations) then how is 'newness' produced and mediated? How is novelty to be facilitated and recognized? If it is impossible to talk about the new in quite the same way as

under modernism, then, indeed, is it possible to talk about 'newness' at all? Postmodernism has tended to answer these questions by assuming that 'newness' is now merely a (faded) effect of pastness, the mixing and reworking of previous styles, and as such this should be seen as a liberation from the would-be repressive teleology of modernist negation. The arguments for this are very familiar and represent a fundamental retreat to a neo-classicized model of artistic production: what can be made from art is only that which can be made from the institutionally ascribed conventions of art. In doing so they represent a retreat from modern art's diremptive, expressive content, the thing that modernism shaped, channelled and made its own in its interlocking progress with the development of subjectivity under early capitalism. What makes modernism and the avant-garde so protean is the harnessing of form as *a process of subjective resistance and struggle*. Hence, what postmodernism's academicization of 'newness' produces, essentially, is a suppression or delimitation of this struggle and expressive function of art - the fact that under conditions of art's alienation, the materials, forms and means of expression of art will of themselves be necessarily alienated. Art's reflection on its own condition is not just mediated by reflection on its own traditions, but on the extra-artistic conditions of possibility of those traditions. The idea, therefore, that the production of art is now solely an autopoietic process is a formalistic reduction of art's reflective and expressive content.

Autopoiesis and the avant-garde

Nicholas Luhmann is, perhaps, the most theoretically astute defender after postmodernism of the autopoietic position. For Luhmann the renewal of art is possible only in art's terms. "Of course, artistic communication could never come about without society, without consciousness, without life or material. But in order to determine how the autopoiesis of art is possible, one must observe the art

system and treat every thing else as environment".[24] ("environment" meaning, here, everything that is external to the internal determinations of art). Indeed the evolution of art is "its own accomplishment. It cannot be caused by external intervention". [25] Which for Luhmann does not mean that under the conditions of autopoiesis that the content of art is predictable from the past content of art, but that the internal schemas of art will of themselves of necessity provide the differential moves art is able to make.

However, despite the emphasis on art's recursive renewal and expansion, Luhmann's system has a marginal place for the agency of the artist and for the incursions of the non-artistic real into art, and as such, has little interest in autonomy in art as the mediated site of conflict and division.[26] Autonomy is simply that which pulls art's recursiveness along; that which gives internal shape to art's unfolding. In this way the role of art is to mark its difference from other works of art, without dissolving its critically observable identity as art. Luhmann has no sympathy for the extra-artistic content of the avant-garde's negation of the category of art: that is, the *positive realization* of art in society. The autopoietic content of art is *system-autonomous*, it is not the expression of cultural and social division.[27] This leaves his theory of negation without any universalizable social content. Indeed, autopoiesis on Luhmann's account is thoroughly particularist, given the ease with which its logic is identifiable with the logic of the

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[24] Nicholas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, translated by Eve. M.Knodt, Stanford University Press, 2001, p51

[25] Luhmann, ibid, p235

[26] This not to say that Luhmann has forgotten the 'subject', but that he believes you do not *need* subjects to account for change; change is supra-agentive.

[27] The closed, internalist identity of Luhmann's theory of autopoietic production, is neatly summed up by Norbert Bolz in a comparison between Adorno and Luhmann. In Adorno the search for meaning "must be outside, I must go out flee, away from society. Whereas this idea in Weber, Gehlen, and Luhmann is precisely the reverse: You are nothing until you go in." 'Gnosis and Systems Theory: A Conversation between Norbert Bolz and Michael Hirsch', *Adorno: Die Möglichkeit Des Unmöglichen/The Impossibility of the Impossible*, Lukas & Sternberg, 2003, p103

commodity-form itself: the constant figural remaking of the object. Nothing breaks in to shift the *social relations* of art's production and as such nothing mediates difference as the critique of existing social and property relations. This account leads to a fundamental split in his theory between what we might call, following Hegel, the first-negation of autopoiesis and second negation. By first-negation I mean the recursive conditions of art's autopoiesis, its commodity-specific conditions of production; by second-negation I mean the leap to freedom through the negation of the negation that Hegel understood as the force of liberation immanent to human beings and that he termed Absolute negativity. Autopoiesis, first-negation and second negation are not categories I employ in the main body of this thesis. Their elaboration here is the result of my reflection on my discussion of autonomy and the avant-garde in the very writing of this introduction. However, their content is implicit at all times in my arguments.

In the *Science of Logic,* Hegel attacks the impatience of those who wish to go beyond the determinate and arrive immediately in the Absolute (universal freedom), which is nothing but the "infinite abstract". Hegel calls this version of the absolute an imaginary absolute: impatience oversteps the 'becoming richer' of the dialectical progress of freedom, short-circuits it, if you like. But for Hegel this need to recognise freedom as a path from simplicity to complexity is not infinite. The process reaches a stage of 'finalization' in what Hegel calls the pure Idea, in which determinateness of the Notion (the principle of freedom) is raised to the actuality of the Notion, to an absolute liberation. There is no point of transition in this stage of freedom. Rather, the Idea freely releases itself in "self-security and self-repose". The Idea *posits* itself. In this sense the Absolute is not the end of consciousness and difference but the "identity of the theoretical and the practical idea".[28] This understanding of the Absolute and negation, however, is not shared by many contemporary philosophers and cultural theorists on the left (for

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[28] G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* [1830], translated by William Wallace, with a foreword by J.N. Finlay, Oxford University Press, 1975, p292.

example, Deleuze, Derrida, Negri, Habermas, Moishe Postone), who read Hegel's Absolute as an interminable machine of heteronomy.[29] Nor is it shared by Adorno. In fact Adorno underpins much of this heterodox left's anti-Hegelianism (despite being a partisan Hegelian), by identifying Hegel's Absolute indefatigably with a totalising subject that subsumes the actual.[30] For Adorno, famously, Hegel's Absolute is seen as providing a justification for the self-expanding logic of capital. However, this limited understanding of negativity was not shared by Marx. Marx certainly dismissed the tendency of Hegel's system to overthrow the actual, but at no point did he ever reject Hegel's 'negation of the negation' as idealist.[31] Thus he did not view Hegel's concept of dialectical self-development as *limited* to capital. On the contrary he believed that the collective struggle of workers was capable of shattering first negation and directing the dialectic of Absolute negativity. In this way Hegel's absolute underwrites Marx's critique of the capitalist law of value: both stress the link between freedom and the unity of practice and Idea. As Raya Dunayeskaya puts it - perhaps the most theoretically suasive defender of the notion of second negation in Hegel - "it is not a question only of meeting the challenge from practice, but of being able to meet the challenge from the self-development of the Idea, and of deepening theory to the point where it reaches Marx's concept of the philosophy of 'revolution in permanence'". [32] The power of negativity is turned back upon itself, upon the internal as much as the external boundaries to self-movement.

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[29] See for example, Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1978, Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol., translated by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press, 1978, Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination*, Cambridge University Press, 1993

[30] See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B.Ashton, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973

[31] Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol 1, Lawrence & Wishart, 1970.

[32] Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*, edited and introduced by Peter Hudis and Kevin B.Anderson, Lexington Books, 2002, p8

The 'challenge from the self-development of the Idea' is very much missing from Luhmann's theory of difference. But nevertheless Luhmann's position does have the virtue of making the question of autonomy within the circumscribed social and cultural conditions of late capitalism a critical priority, given the simplicity with which the defenders of post-autonomous art claim to dissolve art *into* the social and social *technik*. Autopoiesis is a theory of the internal constraints of art's self-unfolding. Autopoiesis, then, needs to be taken seriously in any discussion of negation, as way of holding onto the critical content of art's autonomy within the sphere of first negation. But it needs to be qualified and transformed by notions of resistance, struggle and disaffirmation, in short by the subjective legacy of aesthetic negativity. This is the crucial distinction that this thesis develops across a range of materials, identities and practices.

Thus, if the challenge of negation in art is not simply the supersession or transgression of tradition or art itself, then, it must conform, following Hegel, to a process of *determinate* negation, in which reversal, parody and paradox and other rhetorical strategies of displacement prevail. In this Luhmann is at least correct: art is a self-destablizing, recursive process. This means, to produce novelty does not mean producing that which is without precedent - a founding myth of the production of modernist style - but rather, to engage in a process in which signs and materials are incorporated into new constellations, yielding non-customary forms of attention and therefore requiring from the spectator a renewed engagement with art as a non-heteronomous experience. Hence the production of 'novelty' is better understood as the transformation of given range of mediums into diverse and unanticipated forms on the basis of the subject's marking of an 'unmarked-marked' space. But *contra* Luhmann, this marking of unmarked space - what after Spencer Brown he calls the calculus of form - is also driven by the diremptions of the subject, the subject who is himself or herself 'out of joint' with the traditions he or she inhabits and performs. The internal recursivity of art, therefore, is not just a formal process based on matters of taste or semiotic

playfulness, art's recursivity is the very means by which certain epistemological claims about the world (realism) are made. To mark the unmarked is to mark a space in the name of art's extra-artistic claims on the real. The determinate negations of art are also claims on the *universal content* of art in a future post-capitalist world. In wresting meaning from non-meaning the making of meaning dissolves the finititude of given forms.

But by what means is this negation of the negation mediated in art? By what means is this non-identitary content of art produced? If negation is of necessity a process of determinate negation, and this, in turn, is mediated by the alienated conditions of art's prevailing materials, then non-identity means those forms and experience that art cannot assimilate, that lie beyond its given boundaries, and that therefore reveals the contingency of art as a category - in short the materials and forms of anti-art. Without anti-art as the place where assimilated aesthetic experience is tested, art can only reproduce itself as academic precedent and heteronomous experience. As such, it is the continuous redefinition of the boundaries of art by the strategies of anti-art which forms the basis by which art negates what has been previously designated autonomous and aesthetic in order to constitute autonomy and aesthetic experience anew. Anti-art is the category through which negation and self-negation are brought to consciousness in art (first negation and second negation), the set of relations between what is coherent and incoherent, illicit and licit, competent and incompetent, that questions and probes the boundaries of prevailing notions of aesthetic experience. Anti-art, then, is fundamental to the material content of negation and the marking of the unmarked space.

In these terms, the strategies of anti-art as they played out in some aspects of contemporary art are one of the primary concerns of this thesis. These strategies can be grouped under two main categories: the performance of scepticism and the performance of incompetence or failure. These two categories overlap, but they

retain enough internal differentiation to remain conceptually distinct. The performance of scepticism is the general enactment of the category of art as a contingent or open category; and the performance of incompetence refers to those specific strategies and forms that embody this performance of scepticism. Indeed, these strategies provide the key part of the title of this thesis and also define the role of anti-art generally within this work: 'amateurism', the 'trickster', 'imageless truth', 'ventriloquism', 'iconophobia', 'iatrogenesis' (co-dependence). These are strategies which have become crucial to the production of avant-garde art since the 1960s, and in important ways define the shift from conceptual art to post-conceptualism. That is, they are first and foremost *deflationary* categories, and it is the deflation of artistic form and authorship, which has overwhelmingly come to identify the art of the period. What do I mean by deflation?

Modernism and deflation

Modernism's moves against the academy and the legacy of classicism was characterized by the ironization of genre, gesture, pose and convention. For example in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, (1863) and Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) the female nude is rendered incongruous. In Manet it takes the form of a perverse exhibitionism, thereby ridiculing the proprietariness of the nude in the classical landscape, and in Picasso the sensual contours of the female body associated with the traditional 'courtesan picture' become opaque and ugly. The effect in both cases is to lower the tone, so to speak, by bringing the ideal into conflict with the prosaic and crude.[33]

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[33] This view of modernism as a confrontation with the academic female nude has shaped a whole generation of artist historians reading of Second Empire modernism and after. For instance, T.J. Clark (*The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* ,Thames & Hudson, 1985), Paul Wood (*The Challenge of the Avant-Garde,* Yale University/Open University Press, 1999), Griselda Pollock (*Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* , Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), Rosalind Krauss (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* ,MIT, 1986), Jeffrey Weiss (*The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and the Avant-Garde* , Yale University Press, 1994), and others, have all used the problem of the representation of the female body to stage their understanding of modernist irony and its

Here the deflation of classical form is an intra-painterly issue: by displacing the female nude from classical balance painting is made to forfeit its expected coherence and sensuous integrity. In this respect deflation is attached to the conspicuous failure to paint within the framework of harmonious balance and proportion. Indeed, in these two works Manet and Picasso invite the threat of incoherence, especially in Picasso where the violent flattening of form and noxious colour pushes the tentative disassemblage of space explored in Manet into inchoateness. In both works deflation is marked by the wish to expel painterly expression from stable figure ground relations, and as such, is distinguished by its desire to wrest painting as a two-dimensional surface from naturalistic illusion. When Picasso introduced collaged elements into the space of painting this deflationary content changed, however, and changed forever. The incorporation of found mass printed materials into the early *papier collages*, for the first time, places the deflationary logic of modernist anti-classicism in opposition *to* painting and to the aesthetic boundedness of art. That is, with the readymade deflation entered the realm of anti-art, positioning art's strategies of negation in conflict with the canon of painterly achievement *tout court*. As a result deflation becomes embodied in a radical reorientation and expansion of artistic skill: collage, photography, assemblage, link the negation of painting with the development of forms of non-artistic technique. The measure of artistic competence shifts from mark making to the positioning, arranging, and conjunction of pregiven processes and prefabricated forms. This compositional shift is very familiar in histories of modernism.[34] But the nature of its

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immanent critique of tradition. My concept of deflation - in contrast to such cognates as adulteration, recoding, *gaucherie* or, *blague* , etc - however, differs from much of this literature, in linking its belittling strategies to a dialectic of de-skilling and re-skilling, which encompasses both painting and post-painting practice. That is, after Duchamp, deflation becomes a matter of art's relationship to general social technique, and not a problem internal to the painterly representation of the figure. In this sense deflation is what happens to technique in art across of all art's skill-bases once de-skilling becomes a socially objective fact.

[34] See for example, Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde,* op cit

deflationary content is rarely commented on. With the shift to a deflationary logic *outside* the painting, the position of the artist also shifts. The artists marks, breaks, interrupts the surface of the painting - the artist thereby reaching *into* the space of the painting - in a way that signals that the painting is now historically 'in the way', so to speak, of art's technical demands. That is, Picasso and Braque recognise that the problem of making a convincing painting is also now an external one: paintings can be made and accomplished without carrying through painting as an aesthetically bounded totality. Paintings can be made of alien, non-painterly things, and as such they can be made with very little labour. Or rather, painting can easily incorporate non-painterly things without failing as paintings or as autonomous aesthetic objects.

This objectification of art's deflationary's logic in the form of the readymade in the artwork is what represents the great seismic shift of 20th century art. Modernist art's negations are now directed not just to the genres and conventions of painting, but to the formal hierarchies in which painting is itself positioned.[35] Art's negations are now located in opposition to/and tension with, the forms of painting. Duchamp, of course, is the first artist to systematize this break, through the readymade, providing the ground rules for the deflationary strategies of 20th century art. By locating meaning in the aesthetically chosen found object (that is the object of artistic discrimination) the artist is no longer bounded by the expressive demands of a *covering a surface*, but by the demands of organizing, and giving meaning to, extant signs and objects. "It is a kind of rendezvous" said Duchamp. [36] The deflationary content of art is subject to the thoroughgoing

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[35] For recent discussions of the relations between modernist painting and the readymade, see Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT, 1996, and David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp1910-1941*, MIT, 1998

[36] Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, edited by Michael Sanouillet & Elmer Peterson, Thames and Hudson, 1975 p32

dismantling of the metaphysics of hand, of handicraft, of the handmade. This means the eye and the hand experience a general redirection through the deflationary impact of the readymade. If the post-cubist painter is compelled to place something into the space of the painting in order to render that space believable as a painting, the Duchampian artist is free to place any object in any art context, without recourse to the organizational discipline of the painterly frame. The production of meaning as the act of placing becomes *indeterminate* in this sense. Hence, if in the post-cubist painting hand and eye are no longer contained by the dictates of bringing coherence to an orderly progression mark-making, in the Duchampian artist this freedom becomes limitless. This means that the readymade's deflationary logic invites more than a critique of painting's circumscribed sense of artistic craft. Rather, what is important about the readymade is that it reorders the way hand and eye have traditionally determined the form and content of art. The Duchampian readymade disperses the hand and eye to a world of signifers and materials that require forms of mapping, superimposition and coordination other than those circumscribed by painterly forms. This means that Duchampian deflation is not simply a negation of the status of painting, but an actual extension of art's competences. The deflation of painting carries with it the *inflationary* force of non-aesthetic technical skills, skills drawn from other cognitive and practical domains: film, photography, architecture, literature, philosophy, just as the separation of conception from execution places the artist's labour within an extended division of labour. Effectively, Duchampian deflation is the historical site where art's negation is brought into alignment with the technical base of early 20th century mass production.

In this regard the convergence between Duchampian deflation and mass production, impacts with the huge drive to cultural democracy after the Russian revolution. The revolutionary transformation of the artisanal base of the old academy in Russia, brings the inflationary possibilities of non-aesthetic skills in

art into conjunction with the demands of cultural democracy and the institutional demolition of bourgeois artistic forms. There is a massive disinvestment of art from both the confines of singular authorship and from auratic, or privatized, forms of spectatorship. Mechanical reproduction becomes the motor of art's passage into the everyday and collective experience. By the 1920s, then, the deflationary content of art had shed much of its intra-painting content, to be identifiable solely with the revolutionary appropriation of non-art practices. Constructivism and productivism, for example, are central to this transformation. [37] The singular discrete (painterly) object is dissolved into the extra-artistic demands of social transformation (architecture, public monuments, propaganda, design). Art object and social process coincide. In this light it is perhaps a misjudgement actually to call this process deflationary: for the moment of ironization, belittlement, adulteration, that is constitutive of modernism's intra-painterly deflationary logic has passed into the production of an art without the art turning its host. In short, first negation has passed into second negation. It is better to call this period of radical cultural democracy art's dissolution into *social technik*. (the unification of technology, technique and artistic form). Yet, if deflation is not what happened strictly to the production of art in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, *the deflationary* is certainly what continues to bring this brief moment to our attention, and what defines its reception in the US and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. The ironized strategies of certain kinds of American art in the 1950s and 1960s (Fluxus, Ed Keinholz, Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol) are directly indebted to the (faded) memory of the radical democratic content of the deflationary-democratic content of the Soviet and European-Sovietized avant-garde of the 1920s. But with the Stalinist and Nazi destruction of the avant-garde, and with the global reconstitution of art within the confines of the market after WW11, the memory of this deflationary content of art is brought back into the

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[37] For a discusssion of Constructivism and Productivism and the re-definition of artistic labour, see Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946*, University of Chicago, 1997

ironized domain of neo-avant-garde first negation. Nevertheless, if this is the deflation of deflation of itself, the return of deflation to first negation, though, is qualitatively different from the early years of modernism - the years of Manet and Picasso. For irrespective of the dissolution of the early avant-garde, the intervening historical presence of the Soviet and European avant-garde means that art's deflationary logic now carries with it the collective memory of the revolutionary Event. Art's first negations under capitalism might discount the claims of second negation, but these negations enter the *imaginary* space of first negations. And this intrusion is something that hard defenders of autopoietic first negation, like Luhmann, fail to register. This is why even an artist like Warhol who had no explicit radical agenda in the late 1950s, could, in the period from the early sixties up to 1968, invoke the term 'Commonism' to describe his commitment to an 'assembly-line' art. [38] This commitment admittedly didn't last long, yet it points to how after WW11 second-negation continues to haunt and inscribe the first negations of avant-garde practices. Even in those practices that return to some model of painterly sensuousness, such as Abstract Expressionism, there is embedded in their anxious negations of figure-ground relations and the eradication of representation, the utopian moment of second negation.[39]
Indeed, the burying of second negation in the neo-avant-gardes of the 60s, finally explodes into view with Conceptual art in the late sixties, as American Modernism's attenuated version of first negation in the writings of Greenberg came to look merely like a version of crisis management. Conceptual art is the moment in recent memory where first-negation and second-negation meet (openly) again.[40] The revolutionary impact of May 68 did not produce Conceptual art - that is clear - however, it did allow art's deflationary dynamic to

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[38] For a discussion of the term 'Commonism', see Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar Artist*, University of Chicago, 1996

[39] TJ Clark, offers a hint of this in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, 1999

[40] Conceptual art is the point where the deflationary characteristics of modernism are repositioned within the deflected radicalism of the neo-avant-garde.

pass back over Modernism into some reengagement with the social and the political as first-order activities. Conceptual art's critique of authorship, the deprivileging of painterly sensuousness, the erosion of the division between image and text, and the rejection of the museum as the primary exhibition space of art in favour of the small private gallery, brought first negation back into the realm of second negation. The dissolution of form and the re-expansion of art's technical base reconnected modernism to the interdisciplinarity of the early avant-garde. Art again became linked to a critique of the division of labour. By exchanging studio fabrication for industrial fabrication, artisanal production for group production, the foundry and the canvas for the photo-lab and the kitchen, the museum for the non-artistic context, art was reopened to the avant-garde's liquidation of the barrier between artistic technique and general social technique. The collective production and extra-studio location of art became the constitutive means of producing new artistic publics.

But if these processes were soon subject to retardation and re-enclosure by the art-market this does not obviate their historical penetration of the technical domain of art. Indeed, Conceptual art reveals how much first negation and second negation are now intertwined at the point of art's production and reception. We live in an epoch where the possibility of second negation is implicated in the technical and aesthetic decisions taken in the domain of first negation. The liquidation of the barrier between artistic technique and general social technique is the everyday horizon of art after Conceptual art. However, this is not to say that this constitutes a democracy of art in waiting, as assumed in much critical postmodernism.[41] But rather, that the technical 'deskilling' of art after Conceptual art is not, as in conservative opinion, evidence of the dissolution of artistic value, but its actual equalization. Deskilling, in other words, is where

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[41] See for instance, Carol Squires ed., *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, Bay Press, 1990

second negation - as general social technique - is produced and sustained.[42] Similarly, this is not to say that the presence of second negation in the technical domain of contemporary art constitute the materials for pre-revolutionary practice, but, rather, that its utopian content is inscribed in the finite actuality of everyday practices. *Second negation ghosts first negation.* It is the thing that the autopoiesis of first negation cannot suppress, the thing that autopoiesis continually calls on to mark its marked-unmarked space. And, essentially, this is what these chapters, with their different voices and materials, are concerned with: the infiltration, or memory, or unconscious trace of second-negation in the dominant art of first negation of our times.

As a consequence many of the practices I talk about (Bank's grotesqueries, Emma Kay's memorization of the Bible and Shakespeare and Rod Dickinson's crop-circles) have a host-like or residual feel to them in their relationship to the recent traditions and forms of the modern in art; and, as result, this is why notions of 'amateurism', 'incompetence', 'ventriloquism' and 'iatrogenesis' are so important for reading the art's aporias and absences of this art. The deflationary strategies of these artists produce a concrete delimitation of what constitutes skill and value in art, which leaves the viewer with a strong sense of the work's 'failure'. Hence my reading of this art is not about stepping forward to defend the emergence of a new and robust tradition. The art after post-conceptualism, after critical postmodernism, does not constitute some confident winning back of the cultural high-ground. On the contrary its qualities and achievements are shot through with all the inherited insecurities and disabled fealties of the epoch - only more so. These diminished expectations, in turn, leave these deflationary strategies in a very different position to that of the deflationary in modernism we are accustomed to and which I have already discussed. There is an overriding

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[42] For a discussion of deskilling and production see, Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monoply Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, introduction by John Bellamy Foster, Monthly Review Press, 1998

sense in contemporary practice that the artist is a 'faded' category, something which is hollowed out, epicene even. (Remember this is a generation whose relationship to the artist-myths of Romanticism is even more denuded than that of Conceptual art). The artist is seen merely as an ensemble of (limited) skills and attributes, hence the extensive move within this generation to collaborative practice and group work.[43] But this 'fading' of the artist is not a posture, or an expression of the critical 'defeat' of art. Under bourgeois democracy there can be no *demise* of art. This 'fading', rather, is the extenuated internalization of art's cultural crisis. It is, therefore, a symptom of art's limited social praxis, and consequently as an experience of historical and political constraint not so easily ameliorated or transmuted. Artists of confident first-order second negation indeed exist, and some of the most interesting art-theoretical work currently being done is, paradoxically in this area.[44] But this work is always being recalled to the 'artworld', so to speak, in order to make itself visible as art. The social and political criteria required for first-order negation to function transparently as the liquidation of the barrier between artistic technique and social technique do not exist at present. And this is why the 'faded' artistic category of the amateur, in particular, is so significant for the claims of this thesis.

The amateur's rebuke

I became concerned with the category of the amateur in the mid-1990s whilst working on my book on photography the *Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (1998)[45] and on the edited collection *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain, 1966-1976*

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[43] See John Roberts and Stephen Wright eds., special issue on Collaboration, *Third Text*, December 2004.

[44] See for example the work associated with the cultural/political journals *Mouvements* and *Multitudes* in Paris, and The Newspaper of the Engaged Platform in St.Petersburg.

[45] John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, 1998

(1997).[46] It had become clearer to me - tentatively confirmed by my experience of the new art in Britain and the US in the 1990s - that the category of the amateur provided an important framework for exploring the links between artistic subjectivity and the deflationary dynamics of nineteenth and twentieth century art .[47] This was particularly the case in the area of photography, where the withdrawal from, or critique of, professional notions of skill, finesse and fine-art ideology, had played a key part in the theorization of photography's self-declared cognitive distance from painting and its would-be democratic ethos from the 1920s onwards. What photography's mass reproducibility opened up, with its standardization of artistic skills, was the erosion of the distinction between specialist and non-specialist. The history of photography is inseparable from this profound dismantling of art's application of traditional skills, and is thus precisely a history of the corruption and dissolution of professionally endorsed fine-art ideology. Nevertheless the notion of the amateur does not really exist in the theories and practices of photography from the 1920s to Conceptual art. It has a residual empirical presence, particularly in Conceptual art, but not an explicit theoretical one. This is because its theoretical cognates - the author as producer, the artist as non-specialist, the artist as technician - held the political high-ground.[48] But, as the political high-ground fell away in the early seventies, the

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[46] John Roberts, ed, *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain*, Camerawords, 1997

[47] This theorization of the amateur had been predated from the mid-eighties by an interest on my part in Terry Atkinson's notion of painterly 'botching' and Leon Golub's notion of painterly 'awkwardness'. 'Botching' for Atkinson was a conceptual-art derived constraint on 'representational transparency'. The introduction of caricature, misregistration and anachronistic detail in his WW1 drawings deflated the hubris of social realist truthfulness (while remaining faithful to some notion of realist relevance and adequacy in art). Golub's notion of 'awkwardness' was derived from trying to match the immanent uncertainty of painting with the cognitive violence of mass culture. Both, though, derived their impetus from the modernist necessity for *gaucherie*. The debate on incompetence and competence didn't develop far in the 1980s. This had much to do with its location in painting, which linked incompetence primarily to 'pictorial breakdown' or adulteration. See also TJ Clark, on this question, 'Arguments About Modernism: A Reply to Michael Fried', in ed., Francis Frascina, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Harper & Row, 1985

[48] See for example, Allan Sekula, *Dismal Science, Photo Works 1972-1996*, University

generally undertheorized category of the amateur, in an ironic reversal, became available for political theorization. That is, in a situation where the transformative functions of avant-garde culture were blocked, it represented a place where *avant-garde subjectivity* could continue to be explored. Hence its constitutive place within the deflationary dynamics of contemporary art. Two essays also published in the mid-1990s, confirmed and developed this argument for me. Jeff Wall's '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography, in, or as, Conceptual Art' (1995),[49] , which traced the presence of the amateur in and out of photographic Modernism, and Art & Language's 'We Aim to Be Amateurs' (1996), which presented a polemical identification between the group's critique of professionalized postmodern modes and the disaffirmative content of the parochial/local.[50] On this basis, the amateur was able to take on a clearer functional identity for me. I would argue that the amateur is one of the key mediatory figures in contemporary practice because of the way it 'stabilizes' the performance of scepticism and the fading of the artist across the divide between first negation and second negation. The amateur represents both an imaginary figure or ego ideal that secures a space for the deflationary in art against institutional professionalisation; *and* the 'democratic' expression of art's technological equalization of skill. It is a disaffirmative figure, a figure that identifies with 'failure' and cultural exclusion as the price of authentic expression, for it is only in the realm of 'failure' (of that which doesn't meet prevailing criteria of success), that the new and unanticipated, and therefore the non-heteronomous in art, might emerge.

Galleries of Ilinois State University, 1999

[49] Jeff Wall,'"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography, in, or as, Conceptual Art', in eds., Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1995

[50] Art & Language, 'We Aim to Be Amateurs', Kunstalle St.Gallen, 1996. See also 'We Aimed to Be Amateurs', in Alex Alberro and Blake Stimpson, eds, *Conceptual Art*, MIT, 2000

What distinguishes the amateur is that he or she is a 'low cultural figure', a figure of cultural exclusion and disdain. But this does not necessarily make him or her technically incompetent. Rather, as a figure who aspires to, but fails meet to professional standards, the amateur's failure lies in his or her inability to *see* what these requirements consist of, and this can take the form, equally, of technical bravura as of technical incompetence. For example many amateur painters and photographers are eager to reproduce techniques that appear to have a high-cultural imprimatur, or mimic the most technically advanced aspects of the art of the moment. Conversely there are professional artists (artists who are identified by the profession as artists) who are inadvertently or self-consciously incompetent technically. The first kind of amateur is overlooked no matter what he or she achieves, the latter is not, irrespective of how amateurish or lacking in adroitness their work is. The modern artist's identification with the amateur, then, does not lie in actual feelings of cultural exclusion, but in the way cultural exclusion forces the amateur to strives and fail, strive and fail in order to reach their desired object. For in this failure to achieve a professional identity lies the dilemma of modern art: the necessity of 'mis-seeing' or mistranslation as the source of artistic autonomy. Modern art therefore finds an inverted or displaced avant-gardism in the amateur artist's failure to stabilise his or her object of desire. This in turn finds its metonymic expression for the modern artist in the 'low forms' and perceived technical awkwardness of the amateur aspirant. Much contemporary art, with its encoding of incompetence-as-competence, and a DIY sensibility, embraces these strategies. But, of course, the modern artist at no point seeks to *be* an amateur in any strict and unambiguous sense (see Chapter 6). The modern artist-as-amateur is, rather, a *performative* identity.[51] The artist only claims to be an amateur - or amateurish - in so far as he or she does not want to be seen as a particular kind of professional: an artist possessed of what passes

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[51] See John Roberts, 'In Character', in ed., Charles Harrison, *Art & Language in Practice* ,Vol 2, Fundació Antoni Tapies, Barcelona, 1999

institutionally for competence and 'good taste'.[52] The modern artist-as-amateur, then, is a struggle over art's relationship to inherited practices, forms of attention and cultural identities, on the basis that these inherited practices, forms of attention and identities lead art in to heteronomy and the academic. The amateur, consequently, is by no means a uniquely 20th century figure. In fact it has been singularly important to the deflationary moves and strategies of Western modernist art of the last 150 years. Manet and Picasso did not actually profess amateurism, but nevertheless their *gaucherie* is metonymically linked to that of the amateur, for to paint inchoately is to deliberately invite accusations of professional incompetence. The amateur, therefore, is the deflationary figure *par excellence* of modern art's self-exculpation, the figure that shadows modern art's restive relationship to its classical forbears. But this performance of the amateur today is qualitatively different from the modernisms of the past, insofar as after Duchamp, and after Conceptual art, the amateur has become the counter-cultural figure of our times. In fact so advanced is the critique of traditional and modern professionalization in contemporary art that art is now largely tutored within this framework. Staged incompetence and formal dissoluteness have become the modern academic language of the moment. Where does this leave the figure of the amateur and where does it leave the issue of deflation?

The figure of the amateur has been thoroughly incorporated into the technical relations of contemporary art. By this I mean that it now functions as an internal form of 'self-censorship' when the artist is faced with the threat of the internal or external aestheticization of his or her practice. The artist restricts what he or she defines as skilful in advance for fear of producing something too knowing, too clever, too familiar, too polished, too seeking in approval. The amateurish is not a position the artist adopts in opposition to the perceived constraints of an immovable academic tradition, as was the case in early modernism and the avant-garde. Rather, it is a set of 'no-dos' and forms of attention that delimit -

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[52] Thanks to Mike Baldwin for discussions on these points.

contextually - what or what is not acceptable. And this turns crucially on the issue of how artistic skill is perceived by the artist in the wake of the way the readymade has stripped the conventional pictorial and artisanal competences from art's making.

The amateur as a category now operates in a post-readymade art-world in which the advanced technical relations of art are available to everyone, irrespective of their professional schooling. This means that pretty much anyone can produce art that *looks* like advanced art. The acknowledgement of formal incompetence has become diminished. Accordingly, this involves a change in how we identify amateurism as an artistic category. Whereas to paint inchoately like Manet in *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* was to invite accusations of amateurism because of its failure to reach an academic norm, and therefore to claim the amateur as the authentic 'other' to bourgeois culture, to arrange a group of found photographs in a manner similar to the ordinary family album, for example, is today to invite an identification *between* art and non-artistic practices, and therefore to accept that art's skills are open to the non-artist. The skills of the amateur and professional become interchangeable. This means that with the equivalization of artistic skills after the readymade the definition of the amateur has tended to shift into its 'democratic' register: amateurism as a concept of shared social technique.

This is something I analyze at length in Part 2 on photography after Conceptual Art. Since Conceptual art, photography has been the primary area where the identity of the amateur and the equalization of artistic skills has been debated. Indeed, as an avant-garde cognate of the artist-as-technician the amateur here is explored as a kind of footnote to Walter Benjamin's familiar productivist understanding of the photographer as a new category of artist.[53] As a result the amateur becomes the avant-garde figure that is generalisable for advanced art in

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[53] Walter Benjamin,'The Author as Producer', in Victor Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography*, Macmillan 1982

conditions where second-negation artistic identities such as artist-engineer or artist-technician are not so easily amenable to appropriation. Hence, in these terms the amateur is the figure that mediates between first negation and second negation on the basis of the figure's openness to the democratization of art's skills. The amateur becomes the (ironized, reflective, self-deflecting) bridge between artistic technique and general social technique under conditions of art's limited social praxis. This is why deflation in art is no longer merely an intra-artistic or intra-painting question, but the permanently deflected convergence of artistic technique and general social technique. The deflationary strategies of contemporary art are conscious or unconscious placeholder for second negation, glimpses of the Absolute in the actual, to borrow Hegel's formulation.[54] This leaves the deflationary strategies of contemporary art in a paradoxical position: their very assimilation as common practice dissolves their functional distance from bourgeois culture into the modern bourgeois autopoietic. Which, in turn, means that the deflationary as the 'new' requires greater power of internal differencing in order to sustain its logic. That which is deflationary is now caught up in its own internal deflationary tendency.

The question of the significance of these deflationary strategies is at the material core of this thesis. It is what I try to elaborate and evaluate through various case studies (Part 2 and Part 3) and various theoretical interventions (Part 1). This is not to say, however, that case study and theoretical analysis are separated in Part 2 and Part 3. Thus, by drawing the deflationary into the dialectic of first negation and second negation I propose that we need to understand its strategies if we are to understand the autopoiesis of first negation in modern and contemporary art. Deflation, in other words, is the very motor of art's semiotic labour on its own conditions of possibility. But as I have also adumbrated, as a mediation of second negation, it also represents the transcendental ground of autopoiesis. This is why

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[54] G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic*, translated by William Wallace, with a foreward by J.N. Findlay, Oxford University Press, 1975

the deflationary strategies of works which appear ostensibly antipathetic to overt political reading, can often carry the displaced dynamism of second negation or the utopian content of general social technique.

yBas, philistines, and aesthetes

This capacity of ostensibly non-critical work to carry second-negation meaning was reflected in much of the new art in Britain in the early-to-mid 1990s, where the figure of the 'faded' artist and the faux-amateur dominated the output of a local neo-conceptualism. This art has gone under the monicker of Young British Art, and since its emergence has received an enormous amount of press attention, although very little serious criticism.[55] Much of it has suffered from either condescension or bland encomiums. Indeed, the general conflation of the art with the sins of narcissism, whimsy and cynicism, fails to distinguish very different moments and projects within its orbit, and in doing so, refuses or conceals what is conceptually productive about the disorderliness and delinquency of the art as a whole: its engagement with subjectivity and the mass mediation of the capitalist everyday in the languages of distraction and compulsion.The attention the work has received, therefore, has been in banal disproportion to what has made the work compelling: its refusal to invest in art as anything other than a contingent and 'ordinary' category of experience. My interest here is in how various deflationary strategies and modes of attention bear upon this commitment to the would-be 'ordinary' and contingent (the diaristic and confessional, distracted pleasures and autodidactic knowledges), and, in turn, how these commitments function as a resistance to, and an expression of, social and cultural division. Consequently, these commitments presuppose two related questions: in what ways has art's sceptical performance of itself as a category in the 1990s

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[55] Julian Stallabrass's *High-Art Lite*, Verso, 2000, attempted to remedy this. But as with many yBa supporters he was unwilling to recognise what is *conceptually* significant about the art. Stallabrass moved from an initial position of support of yba, to a general critique.

embedded itself in popular modes of attention? and, as such, how is the deflationary mediated by the popular? Indeed, these were the major lines of enquiry that faced anyone in the mid-1990s trying to come to terms with the new art. [56] But, as I have stressed in my criticism of critical postmodernism above, for me these are not questions about the postmodern *incorporation* of the popular sign into critical practice. On the contrary my interest in the new art's engagement with the 'ordinary' lies in the way it openly rejects any intellectual condescension towards the popular, that is, the way it identifies the popular not so much with 'accessibility', but with the more cognitively interesting notion of 'shared subjectivity'. In this art the use of popular pleasures and modes of attention are taken as the pregiven terrain of critical practice. In these terms my concern lay with how the popular was being put to work in the new art, and how this continued or deflected the deflationary drive of modern practice. It was important, therefore, in order to register the cultural divisions external and internal to popular culture to explore the ways in which first negations were produced out of the forms of popular culture, and how deflation was produced out of, and as a critique of, the popular. This has created a need for a renewed development of the theory of art's alienation, and the concept of the philistine in my writing in the late 1990s has, I think, contributed to this.

Faced with the general incorporation of art into an expanded 'popular culture' a theory of artistic subject and spectator that was adequate to the divisions and occlusions of both high-culture and popular culture was needed. But this had to be theory that refused to see the resolution of these divisions in the popular, as critical postmodernism and cultural studies have tended to do. What is productive about the philistine here is that it is identifiable with the culturally excluded, but, as an empirical entity, it could not be said to reside in the realm of the dominated

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[56] For a significant overview of these debates, see David Burrows, ed., *Who's Afraid of Red, White & Blue? attitudes to popular & mass culture, celebrity, alternative & critical practice & identity politics in recent British art*, ARTicle Press, 1997

and the popular. Philistine rejection of learned culture is not translatable simply into a defence *of* popular culture. It is too disaffirmative as category to equate with the pleasures of the popular image and text. Consequently it took on a fugitive and viral character, discharging its negativity into the realms of the populist and aesthete alike. Thus by looking at the idea of the philistine, counter-intuitively, as a productive critique of aesthetic experience from within both popular culture and high-culture, the concept became emblematic of the wider cultural shifts in contemporary art and in the transformed conditions of art's autonomy. With the increasing production of art within the realm of the popular, art of necessity has to define its autonomy *from within* this process of assimilation. Some of this debate is evident in a number of the following chapters (in particular Chapter 5 and 6), but on the whole I do not make much reference in the thesis to the philistine. This is because I do not want the concept to be seen as a master code for understanding the deflationary in contemporary art. The philistine and the deflationary are not the same thing. Although the deflationary is clearly mediated by the effects of cultural and social division, it is not in itself a mode of attention as philistinism is. Similarly, to deflate something maybe cognate with the moment of negation in philistinism (the rejection of dominant or required taste), but deflation and philistinism are driven by very different expectations. Deflation is a concept internal to art, and philistinism is not. That is, philistinism is the internalisation of cultural exclusion as a judgement upon aesthetic experience, and therefore a judgement that is not necessarily specific to *art*. This is one of the reasons I have excluded my essay 'Mad for It!: Philistinism, the New British Art and the Everyday' - what might have been thought of as a companion text for Chapter 10 - from this collection. [57] Given the link I establish between the philistine and various deflationary attributes of the new art, the polemical emphasis on the philistine in this article is open to

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[57] John Roberts, 'Mad For It! Philistinism, the New British Art and the Everyday', *Third Text*, No 35, Summer 1996. This is extended version of the piece which appeared in *Everything* magazine, No 18, op cit.

misunderstanding

The idea of the philistine as the more aggressive twin of the amateur is, nevertheless, something that haunts the deflationary logic of this thesis. It runs like a thread - or sore, if you like - through this collection. But what makes amateur and philistine estranged partners in the end is that the aggression and intractability of the philistine is not so amenable to artistic performativity: the risk is too great. To push the philistine into the open, so to speak, is to face the weight of its reactive prehistory as a concept, which no amount of radical counter-intuitive work can easily dislodge. But if this is precisely why the concept possesses real cultural power, it doesn't make it any easier for artists and writers to identify openly with it, or perform it. Unlike the amateur, the philistine puts the very possibility of a bridge between artistic technique and general social technique under threat. Its resistance 'from below' to art (from below the threshold of appropriate aesthetic judgement) does not necessarily issue in a commitment to anti-art and the renewal of art's autonomy. It can just as easily issue in the eradication of art altogether. Hence the philistine courts nihilism in the way the amateur does not. But this does not make it of any less significance for contemporary art and the position of art generally in relation to cultural and social division. This is because as the ambiguous agency of anti-art, the philistine, or philistine modes of attention, perform the required violation of bourgeois cultural values that is necessary for the emergence of second negation. No revolution is possible without acts of iconoclasm and the destruction of the ossified social relations of bourgeois cultural production, just as no autonomous art practice today is conceivable without art's resistance to its own aestheticization. This is why, as I mentioned earlier, despite the seeming political indifference of various aspects of art in the 1990s, its 'philistine' mediation of the popular was a way of pushing back the creeping aestheticization of art's social relations, particularly on the left. Indeed, the turn to collaborative work in a lot of art in this period, was, in these terms, precisely an expression of a resistance to the notion of the 'return to aesthetics' as a substitute for politics. This anti-aestheticism, unfortunately has been written out of the recent histories of this

moment. The critical subterfuges of the new art have been exchanged for either a PR celebration of a new version of a (depoliticized) British of American Pop art. or, conversely, a dismissal of the period as a falling away from the rigours of 70s high-seriousness. Seriousness though comes in many forms. This is because art's deflationary logic cannot be secured against some imagined notion of stable critical practice. It is always a rejoinder or rebuke to the notion of art's unassailable virtue. It is craven therefore to assume that art which supposedly negates its own 'best interests' does not open onto to the Absolute. For to attack one's own 'best interests' is not simply an act of self-abnegation, or rather it doesn't end in self-abnegation; it's a way of testing the very limits of first negation.

Epilogue

This thesis represents just over five years of work on the problems of contemporary art and culture. As I noted at the beginning my critical and theoretical voice tends to shift from essay to essay and from section to section. But if Part 1, is the most apparently philosophical of all the sections, there is a general philosophical debt to Adorno throughout the writing. In fact Adorno is the bridge between the notion of the primacy of negation of this thesis and various aspects of my work over the last ten years. For example, it is Adorno's passing remarks on the philistine in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970),[58] that provided one of the added spurs to myself and Dave Beech in the mid-1990s to think through the concept of the philistine in relation to the problems of contemporary culture and what we dubbed the New Aestheticism.[59] Similarly without the rigorous precedent of Adorno the dialectical theory of culture here would either be an impossibility or severely diminished (despite the absence of a theory of second

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[58] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by C.Lenhardt, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984

[59] See Dave Beech and John Roberts 'The Spectres of the Aesthetic', *New Left Review*, No 218, July August, 1996, reprinted in Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso 2002

negation in Adorno, Adorno, *par excellence*, is the theorist of first negation). This is why this thesis is of necessity post-Adornian in its Adornian defence of autonomy and the possibility of the avant-garde. Section 2 expands this dialectical logic in relation to the problems of contemporary photography as the possible ground of art's deflationary content today.

Photography is where artistic technique and general social technique continue to meet at their most explicit, as they did for the original avant-garde. But today there can be no unmediated defence of photography as general social technique, as if photography was enabling of social transformation in the way it was held to be in the 1920s and 1930s. Photography has passed into the realm of general aesthetic discourse, as evidenced by its widespread assimilation into the canon of modern art in the museum. Section 2 addresses this issue as one of the defining problems of art's deflationary logic now. Photography and artists' film as the great avant-garde disrespectors of the painterly colonization of aesthetics, have themselves fallen under its institutional gaze, requiring that photography re-examine its institutional location. But if photography is now subject to the aesthetic discourse of the art institution, this does obviate what remains intractable about it as medium: its spontaneity once placed in the hands of the non-specialist, and its power of ostension, the fact that the photographer 'points' at things and in doing so is engaged (potentially) in an act of interruption, a break in the continuum of alienated appearances. This latter represents the 'traumatic' content of the photographic document; and this, I argue, still has a significant critical and deflationary function, as evidenced by the various and widespread uses of the snapshot in contemporary practice. Finally, Part 3 employs a philosophical art history to explore the continuities and discontinuities of Conceptual art in the art of the late 1990s. The art of the 1990s doesn't simply rehearse the moves and strategies of Conceptual art. On the contrary, as I have stressed, it transcribes them into a new intellectual context by asking them a different set of questions. The notion of a philosophised art history is pertinent here, then, particularly in relation to my defence of a dialectical art theory

informed by an Hegelian model of first negation and second negation. For both conventional art history and radical art history studiously avoid the conceptual problem of form and meaning. The development of art is either narrated as the aesthetic resolution of inherited artistic problems or as the history of possible or failed social interventions.[60] It is rarely discussed as a problem of critical emergence, of art's forms' winning or asserting a space for themselves in the face of all those forces - artistic and social - that would delimit its conceptual novelty. As a consequence of this, art history fails to address how the 'new' in art remains a problem of *intellectual speculation*, relying too frequently instead on a normative understanding of value. But over a hundred and fifty years of the modern in art suggests otherwise. For the 'new' is not a falling away from the past or recent past, or simply a reversal of the achievements of the past, just as it is not the place where the past is sleekly superseded. One of the demands of dialectical art theory is that it resists art history's premature judgements on the 'new' (as much as it spoils the empty celebration of the contemporary). The 'new', rather, is the place where the past is reinscribed in the light of the problems and historical blockages of the present. Historicism in contrast - as the other of dialectical theory - only leads to the endless diffusion of the same as the new.

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[60] See recently, for example, Thierry De Duve's *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, 1996

Part 1: Autonomy and the Avant – Garde

Chapter 1: After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, and Critique

In conversation with two artist friends recently they both declared that Adorno was a far more serious and productive guide to their practices than any other philosopher or aesthetician. Given their work and histories as artists - one had lived through the period of conceptual art and had been won over briefly to its arguments, the other emerged out of its ruins - this was a surprise. Like many artists in the late seventies and early eighties both had fallen under the sway of Walter Benjamin, and were convinced, in their respective ways, that the dissolution of the category of Art into the forms of modern technology and everyday life was a good thing. Indeed both artists were proselytisers for photography and its powers of social reference and communality. Discussions of art's autonomy were not on their check list of priorities. In fact, if autonomy was discussed or thought of at all it was denounced as bourgeois and idealist. Autonomy was what Clement Greenberg and modernist painters believed in, and the bane of all materialist art criticism. It was not what serious post-conceptualist artists, armed with the 'critique of representation' and theories of the social production of art, should be worrying about.

Today, however, the confidence of their admonitions has diminished considerably. Where there was a commitment to the possibility of a non-specialist audience for art, and a consideration of art's social role in their thinking, now there is a turn to the space and time and immanent problems of the artwork itself. The question of autonomy, accordingly, has resurfaced, only now in a setting which is far more sympathetic to its claims.

Why is this so? It is of course highly dubious to credit the work of one author with effecting this kind of change. Yet, since the publication of *Aesthetic Theory*

in English in 1984,[61] Adorno's writing has had an extensive influence on the rethinking of the question of autonomy in Anglophone art theory and philosophical aesthetics. Indeed, the views of my two anonymous artists are not that unusual; Adorno's work has undergone a widespread revival of interest, generating by the late 1990s a minor academic industry in Europe and North America. This is because there is an increasing recognition that both the critique and the defence of autonomy have been *undertheorized* since the seventies; and this being so, Adorno's work is well-placed to give a number of powerful reasons why.

The return to Adorno, needs to be seen, therefore, as part of a deeper response to what is perceived as the wider crisis in art and theory in the wake of the institutional demise of American modernism and the successful rise of postmodernism prior to, and out of the ruins of, the collapse of European communism and the current crisis of the left. In fact it is the struggle over the ideological legitimation of postmodernism that has allowed Adorno to find a new critical readership today. For amongst anti-postmodernists Adorno is being read not so much as an elitist defender of high modernism - although of course some do read him in this way - but primarily as the scourge of the false or *premature* democracy of postmodernism. Despite postmodernism's purported attack on elitism its critique of autonomy is judged as having produced little in the way of actual transformative social institutions and collective cultural practice. Since the late seventies the dominant form of postmodernism - critical postmodernism - has become linked with the cultural aspirations of the new middle class, as it reinvents the basis of artistic professionalism out of the struggles of feminism and anti-racism, post-colonial theory and queer theory. The outcome is a convergence

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[61] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970] translated by C.Lenhardt, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984

in art between the critique of the mass media, social identity, representation and the institutions of art, and new forms of bourgeois social and academic administration.

This influence of this liberal-left agenda within some of the major cultural and academic institutions of our time is seen by many as a progressive historical achievement. Modernism's dedifferentiated, socially abstract subject has been decisively challenged by the cultural impact of subaltern and marginalized subjectivities, irredeemably damaging the case against familiar conservative accusations of the 'lowering of standards'. But, if postmodernism is in a position of some strength against the critics of multiculturalism and 'anti-aestheticism', it is extremely vulnerable when its claims to cultural emancipation are examined in the light of the narrow class composition of its social base. Just as postmodernism's critique of the avant-garde presents insuperable problems once art's negation of tradition is abandoned for the moral authority of social and political intervention.

Indeed, it is the dissolution of the normative basis of modern art's negation of tradition that has generated the renewed interest in Adorno. For Adorno's defence of autonomy is based on the fundamental premise that art's continued critical potential rests on its resistance to the authority of tradition, whether or not this tradition speaks in the name of social emancipation and enlightenment. Without this process of renewal the transmission of value and meaning in art becomes subject to the positivity of an external, self-legitimating authority and the pieties of 'commitment'. In short, art defines itself through its received codes and protocols, denying the demands of the present in the name of the securities of the past.

Given this, Adorno's defence of autonomy is not to be confused with the transcendental separation of art from its social base or traditional aesthetic

conservativism. Rather, autonomy is the name given to the process of formal and cognitive self-criticism which art must undergo in order to constitute the conditions of its *very possibility and emergence.* In a world which continually reduces the discursive and non-discursive complexities of art to the reconciliations of entertainment, fashion and (recently) social and cultural theory, this self-criticism is an ethical necessity.

The postmodern critique of autonomy, then, confuses the process of self-criticism with simplistic modernist claims of formal development or advance in art. Accordingly, it fails to scrutinise its own academic and idealist conditions of production and reception, insisting that the technological dissolution of art into everyday life claimed by much contemporary practice makes the intimacy between formal values and ethics historically redundant. But this misunderstanding about autonomy is not confined to Adorno's postmodern critics. A number of Adorno's defenders are themselves guilty of traducing its dialectical content. The move 'back to' to Adorno has also generated a proto-conservative reading of autonomy, in which postmodernism is attacked without any proper critical consideration of the expanded social base of the bourgeois institutions of art in the 1980s and 1990s and the critical content of the art since conceptualism.

Fifteen years after the publication of *Aesthetic Theory,* Adorno's new readership stands at the centre of a number of competing critiques of postmodernism. In the following I examine the claims of these positions in the ongoing debate on postmodernism and art, as the basis for an assessment of the possibility of Adorno's continuing relevance for philosophical aesthetics and art theory.

It is possible to divide contemporary Adornian studies into five main categories; 1) The dialogic critics of Adorno, as in the school of post-60s German Critical

Theory, specifically, Jürgen Habermas and Albrecht Wellmer;[62] 2) Peter Bürger's Brechtian critique of Adorno's aesthetic autonomy as a retreat from social praxis;[63] 3) the philosophical defenders of Adorno as a radical aesthete, as in the writing of philosophers JM Bernstein, Andrew Bowie, and the recent translator of the new edition of *Aesthetic Theory*, Robert Hullot-Kentor;[64] 4) the anti-Habermasian interpretation of Adorno as the great theorist of 'totality' and 'reification', as in Fredric Jameson;[65] and 5) the defenders of Adorno as the dialectical theorist of autonomy, as in the philosophical aesthetics of Lambert Zuidervaart and Peter Osborne.[66]

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[62] Jürgen Habermas, 'Questions and Counterquestions' in *Habermas and Modernity*, edited and introduced by Richard J.Bernstein, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985, Jürgen Habermas,*Autonomy and Solidarity*, edited and introduced by Peter Dews, London, Verso, and Albrecht Wellmer, 'Reason, Utopia and the *Dialectic of Enlightenmen*t, in Richard J. Bernstein, ibid

[63] Peter Bürger, [1974] *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* London and Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1984. It is worth pointing out that Bürger's Brechtianism in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, was one of the principal sources of reception of Adorno on the left in the Anglo-American academy until the publication of *Aesthetic Theory*.

[64] Jay M. Bernstein,*The Fate of Art:Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity:from Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990, Robert Hullot-Kentor, 'Translator's Note', in Theodor W.Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London, Athlone Press, 1997

[65] Fredric Jameson,*Late Marxism:Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic,* London, Verso, 1990. Of the five categories that I have proposed Jameson's has the least functional value, insofar as his defence of Adorno in *Late Marxism*, is mainly pedagogic. He doesn't elaborate why Adorno's concept of autonomy has value today. This may something to do with the fact that his engagement with contemporary culture is within comparative literature and architecture and not within the visual arts, where the question of autonomy has immediate and continuing valency.

[66] Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory:The Redemption of Illusion*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT, 1991,
Peter Osborne, 'Aesthetic Autonomy and the Crisis of Theory: Greenberg, Adorno and the Problem of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts', in *New Formations* , No 9 Winter, 1989, Peter Osborne, 'Torn Halves: The Dialectics of a Cultural Dichotomy', *News From Nowhere*, No 7 Winter, 1989. See also Peter Osborne, 'A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno', in *New German Critique*, No 56 Spring/Summer, 1992

Category (1) has affinities with the postmodern critique of Adorno and autonomy, despite its antipathy to postmodernism as a cultural category and philosophical phenomenon.

Both Habermas and Wellmer argue that Adorno's defence of autonomy is falsely opposed to instrumental rationality, and therefore, judge that the work of art is overdetermined as a model of truth. By insisting on autonomy as the basis of artistic value, Adorno opens up an irreconcilable gap between the artwork and socially shared knowledge and social transformation. In sum, Adorno's aesthetic theory for Habermas and Wellmer lacks any proper or reasonable dialogic content. This is because Adorno's hieratic model of reification reduces the conversational and communicative potential of the artwork to a bare minimum. In fact, Adorno always opposes the 'expressive' truth of the artwork to its socially communicative function. The upshot of this is that Adorno has no interest in how people actually experience and use works of art, how their content is mediated *in* everyday life. Art, insist Habermas and Wellmer, does not signify by virtue of its 'intrinsic' expressiveness, but through the intersubjective agency of a given discursive community of reception.

For Bürger, in category (2), this objection to Adorno's would-be indifference to art's discursive functions, forms an explicit political defence of art as social praxis. Whereas Habermas and Wellmer reclaim the notion of art's autonomy under a quasi-Kantian transcendental reason, Bürger dispenses with the dialectics of autonomy altogether. This is based on what Bürger sees as Adorno's wilful historical misrepresentation of the role and function of the avant-garde. By subsuming the post-autonomous artistic claims of the original revolutionary Soviet and German avant-garde under the critical model of the modern neo-avant-

garde, Adorno fails to recognise the qualitatively distinctive moment of the original, namely, that it broke with the high-cultural institutions of art. Adorno's model of autonomy simply continues the death-throes of art's aesthetic and esoteric specialization.

Wellmer's and Habermas's model has had a certain amount of influence, particularly within feminist cultural criticism, which sees Adorno's theory of autonomy as modelled on the repression of bodily pleasures and women's everyday experience. By insisting on modernism as the dissonant negation of sensual pleasure Adorno inherits the iconophobic rationalization of art in post-Platonic philosophy. The Kantian and Hegelian skepticism about sensible form becomes the fear of sensuality as a loss of intellectual control, and as such an unconscious fear of bodily pleasure. However, as Sabine Wilke and Heidi Schlipphacke, argue, this is not because Adorno's modernism allows no place for sensuality and non-disaffirmative pleasures (Adorno is keen on the somatic playfulness of the circus for instance), but that bodily pleasures and sexual difference are left behind "on the trajectory towards aesthetic autonomy". Wilke and Schlipphacke note that this repression is there at the very beginning of *Aesthetic Theory*, when Adorno defines autonomy in emphatic Hegelian terms as a parting of the ways from bodily determination.With Romanticism "art emancipated itself from cuisine and pornography, an emancipation that has become irrevocable".[68]

In contrast to categories (1) and (2), Bernstein and Bowie in category, (3), defend

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[67] Sabine Wilke and Heidi Schlipphacke, 'Construction of a Gendered Subject: A Feminist Reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, in Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity:Essays in Adorno's* Aesthetic Theory, Massachusetts, MIT, 1997

[68] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* translated by C.Lenhardt, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p18

Adorno's dialectic of enlightenment against what is judged to be the sanguine and conciliatory critique of modernity in the dialogic model of art and the premature dissolution of art into everyday life in Bürger.

In this respect this position sets out to redefine the redemptive content of Adorno's claim for art's autonomy. In Adorno the defence of autonomy is construed ontologically, first and foremost, as a defence of aesthetic semblance or illusion. By this Adorno means that it is the artefactual character of the artwork that secures its autonomy, because it is the artefectual character of art which establishes the possibility of aesthetic rationality overcoming instrumental rationality. As socialised, non-coercieve labour, or purposeless purposiveness in the language of Kant, the artwork's fabricated uselessness is able to recall for the viewer the human, non-instrumental purpose of production. Famously this notion of aesthetic form as a redemption of alienated labour becomes a defence of what Adorno calls the process of mimesis internal to the autonomous artwork: its capacity to sustain a relationship of non-instrumental affinity between subject and object. Autonomous artworks, in this sense, both preserve and present the possibility of other kinds of experience. As Bernstein puts it:

the question of aesthetic semblance is the question of the possibility of possibility, of a conception of possible experience that transcends what is now taken to be the parameters of possible experience.[69]

From this perspective, Bernstein, Bowie and other radical aesthetes draw two significant conclusions from the notion of art as the enactment of a promise, which set them off sharply from the dialogic critics of Adorno. The promise of happiness is separate from the mere satisfaction of desire or bodily pleasure -

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[69] Jay M. Bernstein, 1997 'Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics', in Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity:Adorno's* Aesthetic Theory, Massachusetts:MIT, 1997, p198

hence the criticisms of the kind made by Wilke and Schlipphacke are misplaced; and that particular things can be unsubsumable under conceptual categories and yet remain sources of meaning. As a consequence it is the transcendent promise of the reconciliation between sensuality and spirituality in the autonomous artwork, that grounds the truth-claims of art.

Category (4) is similarly preoccupied with the transcendent promise of the artwork. But for Fredric Jameson what is of general concern is how this promise has come into its own again in an historical period of continued stalled social and political transformation. Whereas in the 1970s in the age of national liberation, high-levels of class struggle, and radical cultural transformation, Adorno's promise was seen as an "encumbrance" and "embarrassment",[70] today it keeps alive the untruth of capitalist rationality and freedom. This is because the very historical possibility of the autonomous artwork is what exposes the false totality of capitalist production. Through a deeper commitment to aesthetic truth as the non-negotiable source of dereification and disalienation, Adorno demonstrates that aesthetic theory is never *merely* aesthetic. What is of paramount significance in Adorno for Jameson, therefore, is that all aesthetic questions are taken to be fundamentally historical ones. But, as a consequence of this, Jameson refrains from making actual judgements about modernist works themselves; this is because it is not so much the specific content of Adorno's defence of various kinds of modernist art that counts, but the implications of aesthetic praxis as redemption as a whole. The outcome is a reticence and, even, guardedness about what constitutes the content and boundaries of autonomous art today. Indeed, there is a clear tendency in both the philosophical aesthetics of category (3), and Jameson's position, to evacuate the problems and contradictions of contemporary

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[70] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*, London, Verso, 1990 p5

art practice for the promise of the promise itself. This is the result in Jameson, as in Bernstein and Bowie, of an undialectical interpretation of the *social* content of Adorno's concept of autonomy.

What distinguishes Adorno's theory of autonomy from the early Romantics, the neo-conservative New Criticism of the1950s, and Greenbergian modernists, is that art is seen simultaneously as socially determined *and* autonomous. Or rather, the autonomy of the art object is something which is produced out of the social relations which constitute the institution of art itself. It is not something which is produced immanently out of the object and therefore transmittable as a particular 'style' or 'look'. This means that autonomy is the practical and theoretical outcome of the contradiction between the artwork's exchange value and use-value. Because of the perpetual threat of the loss of the artwork's use-value, art is continually propelled by its own conditions of alienation to find aesthetic strategies which might resist or obviate this process of critical and aesthetic dissolution - the history of the 'new' in modernism derives from the resistance of art to its exchange value. But, at the same time, under capitalism art derives its social identity and value from this process. Thus authentic modern art acquires identity and value in a double movement of negation and self-negation: art achieves visibility through positioning itself in relation to the prevailing norms, interests and protocols of the market and intellectual academy. But once the work achieves institutional and market visibility, the artist is forced to resist the work's own subsumption under a new set of norms if he or she values the thing that defined the work's initial moment of production: its critical difference or aesthetic 'otherness'. For once the value of the new work is institutionally established, the work finds itself part of a new set of prevailing norms and protocols. The exchange value of the artwork, therefore, operates as a kind of 'fiction': artists seek to transform the normative values of the market and the critical academy in their own image, but in the interests of escaping from these values and self-image. That is, the 'fiction' of autonomy has to be dismantled by

the artist if the pursuit of autonomy is to be able to continue to prosecute art's failure to realise its freedom from social dependency. Art's autonomy is *necessarily dependent*, on the alienated conditions of its realization, because it is through art's connection to the 'unresolved antagonisms' of reality that the social content of autonomy is generated. Commodification, then, locks art into an impossible logic: art can only renew itself through undermining or disrupting those qualities that bring it into being. Yet, if this logic is impossible for Adorno it is necessary and inescapable under current relations of production, because, paradoxically, it is this logic which sustains the possibility of art's (and human) freedom. In this sense the possibility of art's autonomy is *socially* driven.

This expansive notion of autonomy is something that is explored in detail in the dialectical theory of autonomy in category (5), particularly in the work of Lambert Zuidervaart and Peter Osborne.

What these writers insist on (which I concur with) is the need for a sharper reintegration of the truth of autonomy into the cultural and social experience of recent art and postmodernism. That is, they call for a development of autonomy away from its grounding in modernist painting and sculpture into the area of new media and their interconnections. For if the value of autonomy rests on its commitment to finding new materials and forms of attention for the 'unresolved antagonisms' of social experience, then this must of necessity be expanded into an analysis of the problems which confront the art of the present, without recourse to nostalgia or moralism. Without the establishment of the link between the expanded means and materials of the art of the last thirty years and the problem of autonomy, aesthetic value is forced back into a conservative reading of the modern. In this way Adorno's dialectics must be brought to bear on Adorno's categories themselves, as a recognition of the historicity of autonomy itself.

Importantly this means transforming the relationship between high-art and popular culture in Adorno's aesthetic theory, for it is the would-be fixture of this binary opposition between 'high' and 'low' that identifies the current historical limits of Adorno's defence of autonomy and that of his contemporary philosophical defenders, who tend to see the art of the last thirty years as a falling away from the sensual achievements of modernism.[71] The failure to acknowledge the expanded social content of autonomy on the part of these defenders is invariably the result of their condescension, or outright hostility, towards mass culture and popular culture. Yet the expanded content of the art of the last thirty years is incomprehensible without a recognition of how the 'low' has challenged and reconfigured the 'high'. But breaking with this condescension towards the popular is not an invitation to dissolve the 'high' *into* the 'low', as in the populist tendencies of postmodernism. Rather, it allows the possibility of a dialectics of 'high' *and* 'low': that is, it reestablishes the opposition between 'high' and 'low' in the light of the contradictions inherent in *both* terms. And this, of course, is something that Adorno himself was highly sensitive to, and which first preoccupied him in the 1930s, even if his judgement on the 'low' was essentially sceptical.

Adorno's antipathy to mass culture is notorious and much criticised. This is based on his view that although high-art or autonomous art, and mass culture or dependent art, are both commodities, dependent artworks are incapable of generating sustainable critical reflection on the part of the spectator and reader. Rather, mass culture offers compensatory forms of libidinal gratification, and as such, functions overall as a form of social repression. The pleasures of mass culture negate the promise of happiness of autonomous art. Yet when Adorno

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[71] See for example, T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1999

actually talks about the 'high' and the 'low' in *Aesthetic Theory* the 'high' refers to the interrelations between autonomy and dependency, of which autonomy is the dominant term. Similarly Adorno is well aware that in mass culture there are moments of autonomy. As he was to say in his letter to Benjamin on March 18, 1936, "If you defend the *kitsch* film against the 'quality' film, no one can be more in agreement with you than I am; but *l'art pour l'art* is just as much in need of a defence".[72] It is important, therefore, to stress that Adorno does not identify mass culture *with* the culture industry; the culture industry is what capitalism does to mass culture. But two things interconnect to make his judgements about modern mass culture utterly marginal in his aesthetic theory: his totalizing view of the reification of mass experience; and as such his overwhelming commitment to analyzing mass culture from the standpoint of autonomous art. Thus, no popular art quite meets the highest standards of the best autonomous art, and the best of autonomous art is always compelled to preserve its boundaries against the encroachments of aesthetic dependency.

In this respect, like categories (2), category (5) distances itself from autonomy as a precondition of the evaluation of all art. As with Bürger - and Habermas and Wellmer - the dialectical theory of autonomy accepts that the truth of autonomy is not the ultimate criterion of art's social significance. Indeed, this conclusion is self-evident in a culture where traditional modernist forms of autonomy no longer provide any moral or political challenge to the effects of reification, just as the pleasures of mass culture and popular culture do not have to negate the promise of happiness, but can, as Osborne says, at certain moments, "heighten the sense of frustration at the broken promise".[73] As a consequence, it is hard to accept, in

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[72] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Letters To Walter Benjamin' [1936], in Ernst Bloch et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, NLB, 1977, p122

[73] Peter Osborne, 'Aesthetic Autonomy and the Crisis of Theory: Greenberg, Adorno and the Problem of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts', in *New Formations* , No 9 Winter, 1989, p60

Adorno's terms, that autonomous art is any more critically effective than dependent art when certain products of mass culture can subvert the conventions of the traditions they operate within and disclose, on occasions, radical aspirations.

On this basis the debate on the dialectical content of autonomy is an attack on Adorno's traditional concern for normative evaluation. Irrespective of their levels of 'autonomy' or 'social dependency' all works of art demonstrate a social function. However, unlike Bürger and the postmodernists, to accept the multiple and variegated functions and forms of reception of artworks does not thereby mean accepting the abandonment of normativity altogether - the postmodernist syndrome of defining art as popular culture and popular culture as art. Rather, what is required is a more differentiated account of art's standards and criteria of evaluation, what Zuidevaart calls a "complex normativity".[74] This complex normativity might include not only "technical excellence, formal depth, aesthetic expressiveness" (attributes conventionally associated with modernism) but also "social scope, potential effectiveness and historical truth": "Rarely would a particular work meet all these norms, nor would very many works display exceptional merit with respect to every norm that they do meet".[75] By this, Zuidevaart means that the supposedly elitist concern with autonomy allows us to rethink the dynamics of popular pleasure and technological development in art, at the same as the dynamics of popular pleasure and technological development in art can allow us to rethink the limits and content of autonomy. Indeed normativity is unavoidable once we accept that the critique of the category of art remains inseparable from the continuing conditions of art's possibility.

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[74] Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory:The Redemption of Illusion*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT, 1991, p241

[75] Zuidervaart, ibid, p246

Osborne adopts a similar position to this. But, in contrast to Zuidervaart, he is far more forceful in arguing that the implications of this dialectic are latent in Adorno's work itself. As he says:

Adorno's own analysis suggests another, far more productive approach [to the question of autonomy]: namely, to lay bare the structure of the dialectic of the dependent and the autonomous within dependent art, and to comprehend it through its opposition to autonomous art, as a distinctive part of a larger cultural whole.[76]

This insistence on the solution to the problem of autonomy lying in the transformation of Adorno's categories themselves is held, rightly, by Osborne to be a political decision. To defend autonomy in the spirit of Adorno as an historical and interrelational concept is to resist those who would judge negation and the critique of tradition in art to be dead and buried. In this respect the continuing importance of Adorno lies in how his concept of autonomy incorporates the irreconcilability of art to its own alienated conditions and fate into the conditions of its own possibility. The idea, therefore, that art can resolve these conditions by claiming allegiance to a given aesthetic tradition or by dissolving itself *into* everyday life, is an avoidance of the realities of art's alienation, whether these forms of reconciliation are offered in the name of cultural democracy or not. Hence the fundamental problem with Bürger's, Habermas's and Wellmer's models - and postmodernism as a whole - is that in their various ways they fail to acknowledge the violence and misrepresentation which underwrite art's mediation of cultural and social division. As in the case of the postmodernists, Habermas and Wellmer assume far too easy an incorporation of the artwork into the principles of communicative rationality, despite the fact human suffering and reification are always threatening to dissolve this rationality

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[76] Peter Osborne , 'Aesthetic Autonomy and the Crisis of Theory: Greenberg, Adorno and the Problem of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts', in *New Formations* , No 9 Winter, p58

into incoherence, bad faith and sentimentality. Indeed the rejection of all forms of aesthetic and social compensation in Adorno's theory of autonomy is designed not in order to foreclose all possible communication, but to render the truth of art as existentially and formally continuous *with* the effects of alienation and reification. By defending a form of autonomy which is constituted through the negation of tradition the irreconcilability of art is coextensive with the irreconcilability of the subject's consciousness of being-in-the-world.

Adorno's legacy, then, needs to be defended against those who would abandon normativity for *shallow* defences of the 'popular' and art's basis in communal discursivity, and all the political substitutionalism that inevitably comes with such positions. However, at the same time, it needs to be recognised that the theoretical resources in Adorno for *sustaining* the social content of autonomy, are highly attenuated, opening up room for misunderstanding and false departures, as in the writing of the Adornian philosophical aesthetes. This is not least because Adorno's notional recognition of the 'autonomous' in the 'dependent' and the 'dependent' in the 'autonomous' leaves the social character of his concept of autonomy highly ambiguous.

Viewed from this perspective, one of the problems with Adorno's writing for his philosophical aesthetic defenders is how to position the claims of anti-art in relation to the critique of tradition, particularly in the light of the most important art of the last thirty years, which has systematically expanded the forms and meanings of aesthetic experience through the strategies of anti-art.

The moment of anti-art for Adorno is determinate for the renewal of art's autonomy; in order to distinguish itself from what has *become* aesthetic, art is forced to expand into, or reclaim non-aesthetic, experiences, forms or practices, (popular and discursive modes of attention, the ready made, the textual etc). But for Adorno this is heavily qualified by his view that such moves always threaten

to dissolve the artwork back *into* the real and the everyday. This leads him to attack the aesthetics of the readymade and to devalue photography. The radical aesthetes of category (3), tend to follow this line, settling for the formal evaluations of Adorno's misjudged conclusions, rather than the dialectical implications of his argument. Consequently, they maintain that Adorno's critical potential today lies in his resistance to the dissolution of the artefectual and sensual base of artistic practice. But if this critique is pursued in order to draw attention to the false democracy of the 'popular' and anti-form - critical postmodernism is uppermost in their minds - it also threatens to disengage autonomy from Adorno's hermeneutical privileging of the 'new' out of anti-art.[77] If the 'new' in art is the constitution of art's autonomy through the determinate negation of tradition, then the impulse of anti-art is *integral* to what has previously established itself as autonomous, and therefore essential to the social content of autonomy. Without this moment of negation autonomy in art degenerates into a confirmation of tradition and the present, meaning that, anti-art is a transgression that autonomy must undergo in order to reconstitute itself.[78]

Accordingly, one of the reasons that there is a close identification between autonomy and the *aesthetics* of modernism in work of the writers in category (3), is that philosophical aesthetics takes the superseded and conventionalized forms of anti-art in modernism as its guide to contemporary practice, losing the *positional logic* of anti-art in the pursuit of art's autonomy. In this sense it is the positional logic of anti-art which drives the social content of art's autonomy. In this way the ambiguity of Adorno's legacy tends to be exacerbated by this kind of philosophical aesthetics, because it treats the concept of autonomy as an abstract philosophical postulate, and not as something determined by the prevailing conditions of art's autonomy.

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[77] See, J M. Bernstein, 'Against Voluptuous Bodies', *New Left Review*, No 225, 1997

[78] For a discussion of this issue see Stewart Martin, 'Autonomy and Anti-Art:Adorno's Concept of Avant-Garde Art', *Constellations*, New York, 2000

Adorno's concept of autonomy, then, generates two interconnected problems for its radical aesthete defenders:1) in the interests of stabilising aesthetic quality and high-culture's negation of mass culture it weakens the presence of anti-art within art's pursuit of autonomy; and 2) in order to distinguish the authenticity of autonomy in art it represses the transcendent moment of autonomy immanent to all forms of culture. This leaves his defenders with very little to use aesthetically when coming to understand the art of the recent past and the massive expansion and diversification of popular cultures in the 1980s and 1990s. By identifying autonomy with tired modernist protocols and by defending an implausible account of ideology and popular culture - popular culture as fundamentally antithetical to the fulfilment of human needs - the radical aesthetes dissolve autonomy into a defensive aestheticism.[79] In this respect the dialectical critics of autonomy are correct: the interrelations between autonomy and mass culture are dead in the water unless retheorized as part of the critical expansion of art's normativity. By expanding the content of normativity the opposition between modernism/anti-reification mass culture/reification is revealed to be no longer functional as a source of absolute value - if ever it was. But, if the dialectical theorists of autonomy correctly relativize the issue of reification, there is, similarly, little sense what this might actually mean in terms of the problems of contemporary art and culture. Osborne's notion of the "critical potential of mass culture",[80] is frustratingly vague.

It is not of course the job of philosophy to answer such questions; philosophy cannot predict or legislate the content of art's autonomy. However, what it can and should do is clarify the conditions for a defence of the social content of

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[79] Andrew Bowie, 'Confessions of a "New Aesthete"', *New Left Review*, No 225, 1997

[80] Peter Osborne, 'Aesthetic Autonomy and the Crisis of Theory: Greenberg, Adorno and the Problem of Postmodernism in the Visual Arts', in *New Formations* , No 9 Winter, 1989, p60

autonomy against its premature aestheticization or dissolution. Hence, the dismantling of the opposition between a high modernist singular normativity and dependent popular culture, means little unless questions of value, meaning and pleasure are based on a theory of artistic subjectivity and spectatorship which adequately represent contemporary transformations in art and culture.

The central problem with the philosophical aesthetes' defence of a version of the traditional modernist subject and spectator is, as I have stressed, its lack of cultural differentiation. What demands our attention, therefore, if we are to establish a workable notion of autonomy is the need to connect the expanded social and aesthetic conditions of art since the 1960s to a theory of negation in art - or anti-art - that does not merely reproduce or reverse the antinomy between 'high' and 'low'. By this I mean that if the concept of autonomy is no longer able to sustain its negative logic through modernism's classical forms of distantiation it requires an aesthetic subject/producer which derives its critical agency from the relations *between* an expanded notion of social identity and form in art and the exclusions and aporias of social and cultural division. In other words, an adequate notion of autonomy is to be derived from the aesthetic subject/producer's mediation of the interrelations of 'high' and 'low', and not merely from their abstract conjunction.

Consequently, the concept of 'complex normativity' becomes clearer if we take the contemporary incorporation of popular modes of attention into the expanded social categories of art as a response to modernist 'expressiveness', as itself divided. The significance of the 'relativization of reification' for a complex normativity is not that it allows art to switch to the popular from the demands of critical distance, but that art's critical functions are structured within an understanding of the popular as both pleasurable *and* alienated. By stressing that popular modes of attention and pleasures define a shared space in which both 'high' and 'low' position themselves in late capitalist culture, the demands of

autonomy are situated as internal to the determinations of dependency. Popular forms of attention are not so much the 'other' of authentic aesthetic life, but the dominant space out of which aesthetic pleasures and values are formed and struggled over.

From this perspective the experience of aesthetic subject/producer is opened up to the pleasures of popular culture and mass culture *without condescension*, which is a significantly different proposition from Adorno's occasional embrace of popular pleasures as a kind of healthy antidote to middle-brow taste. In this way embodied popular pleasures are enjoyed precisely because they refuse to give unqualified assent to the supposed enlightened pleasures of high-culture. However, this refusal of assent does not imply that the taking of such pleasures is a negation of high-culture or that such pleasures are identifiable with an undiscriminating cultural pluralism. On this understanding of the aesthetic subject the taking of pleasures from the popular is not to be confused with the postmodern notion of the popular consumer. Rather, the aesthetic subject takes pleasure from the popular knowing such pleasures *to be* alienated. This is an important epistemological difference, for it reveals something significant that neither the Adornian philosophical aesthetes nor postmodernists take much notice of about the conditions of modern culture: that the pleasures taken from popular culture and high culture are mutually unstable for would-be popular consumers and 'aesthetes' alike - even if this instability is in the final analysis subject to the wider constraints of class division, and therefore unstable in uneven ways. But the important ontological point is that the taking of such pleasures is itself a process of internal division and dissent, for, there is no such thing as the uncultured and unfeeling popular consumer - everybody comes to popular culture and to a work of art with some knowledge and powers of discrimination whatever their educational and cultural accomplishments. And, similarly, this is precisely the point about the cultural limitations inherent in the position of the aesthete, for the aesthete is no less alienated than the popular cultural consumer -

alienated by his or her own fantasy of aesthetic control. So, just as popular modes of attention are themselves internally differentiated under the demands of aesthetic discrimination, the aesthete's would-be disinterested pleasures are the constant, repressive reminder of the embodied and subaltern pleasures of the popular .

Thus, what the concept of complex normativity is able to establish is that both works of autonomous art (high culture) and the products of popular culture share a *common space* of reification and dereification. This allows us to theorize artistic production and reception without recourse to a simplistic model of high culture as the protection of a single normativity and low culture as the degradation of normativity - of one (higher) form of autonomy subsuming another. Indeed the idea of the aesthete as the defender of a normative autonomy and the popular consumer as the undifferentiated consumer of mass culture is utterly regressive. Consequently, the aesthetic subject/producer who acknowledges the dependency in autonomy and moments of autonomy in dependency, might be said to be extending the implications of Adorno's aesthetic theory, but crucially, from within a critical space where cultural alienation is treated as complex and internal to both terms. For the overwhelming problem with the Adornian philosophical aesthetes, is that the conflicts of aesthetic experience are not viewed as the result of the actual and symbolic violence internal to high culture *and* popular culture.

To link the question of aesthetics to symbolic violence is to make clear what connects the debate on art and the popular to what remains of importance in Adorno's writing on autonomy: the fact that the internal and external divisions of autonomy and mass culture are only comprehensible within a *continuum* of actual or symbolic violence. To analyse autonomy and dependency, in terms of the actual and symbolic violence perpetrated against works of art by the culture industry and aestheticism, and in terms of the symbolic violence internal to the social logic of art's autonomy, is to see how modern art's internal history and

external relations with mass culture in the 20th century exist in a continuum of destruction and derogation. What this discloses, importantly, is how symbolic and actual violence constitute the ontological condition of art's production and reception under capitalism. Thus to acknowledge the incorporation of the moment of anti-art into art in terms of the irreconcilability of art's being-in-the-world is to foreground the philosophical and cultural intimacy between negation (of identity) with violence. The logic of art's autonomy is its internal disidentification in the face of art's external derogation.

Theories of aesthetics, however, are largely concerned with dissolving art's interpresence with symbolic and actual violence. As Paul de Man puts its it his critique of aesthetic ideology: "the *aesthetic* is not a separate category but a principle of articulation between various known categories, and modes of cognition".[81] But, an acceptance of this separation is what leads to the culturally undifferentiated aesthete and to the abandonment of a complex normativity and the exigencies of anti-art. The self-divided aesthetic subject, however, challenges this loss of differentiation, insofar as it restores an active recognition and critique of the structural violence internal and external to both the production and reception of art and popular culture.[82] The question of 'complex normativity' as the relativization of reification, therefore, remains incoherent if it does not make visible how the artist and spectator are now situated in a contested space between the modes of attention of popular culture and their critique. It is out of this space between the identification and disidentification of these modes that the contemporary conditions of a 'complex normativity' are currently being

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[81] Paul De Man, 'Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist', *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York:Columbia University Press, 1984, pp264-265

[82] One way of mediating this relationship between symbolic and actual violence and the self-divided aesthetic subject might be through the concept of the philistine. See Dave Beech and John Roberts, 'Spectres of the Aesthetic', *New Left Review*, No 218, 1996, and Dave Beech and John Roberts, 'Tolerating Impurities:An Ontology, Genealogy and Defence of Philistinism', *New Left Review* ,No 227, 1998

produced.[83]

The threat to art's autonomy is immanent to the social conditions of art's existence. But it is the social conditions of art's production and reception which bring the autonomy of the artwork (its challenge to the instrumentalities of market and academy) into being. Autonomous art remains authentically autonomous inasmuch as the conditions of its production recognise this and resist its instrumental and extra-artistic logic. Adorno's expressive model in *Aesthetic Theory*, is, as I have outlined, based on this. But Adorno is unable to develop this because the social content of autonomy is prematurely separated from the negation of autonomy within autonomy - the moment of anti-art. He is unable to see - or trust fully - anti-art as the means by which autonomy is able to mediate art's futural condition and the relations between art and knowledge. This might be described as the moment of 'realism' in art's autonomy, the moment which grounds the dynamic movement of autonomy's social content. Adorno's philosophical followers, however, dissolve this movement, by resolving the issue of autonomy in terms of the defence of a single normativity - against what they see as the loss of all normativity in postmodernism. In this the philosophical defence of autonomy as the negation of aesthetic tradition and protocol remains imperative in the face of the aggressive rejection of normativity in postmodern cultural studies and the positivization of negation in philosophical aesthetics. But the dialectical defence of autonomy is no source of artistic value. It is only the practices and criticism of art that are able to open up the the social content of autonomy. Philosophy's job is to underwrite that possibility, not to substitute itself for that possibility.

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[83] For instance, much of the work produced in Britain in the1990s that now goes under the description of Young British Art and avant-garde US West Coast art of the 1990s.

Chapter 2: The Labour of Subjectivity/ the Subjectivity of Labour: Contemporary Political Theory and the Remaking of the Avant-garde

Questioner: What do you prefer. Impressionism or Post-Impressionism?
Rolf Harris: I've never been much of a one for putting labels on art movements relating to historical time, you know. I mean, I just like the painters that I like. I get a great kick out of Monet's work, and also Van Gogh, and they are completely different from each other.[84]

I pick this dismal and banal item out not because the Australian entertainer Rolf Harris is an easy target for those who want to feel smart and superior about the popular representation of modern art, but because it stands for a symptom of cultural violence against meaning, historical periodization, and modernism in the broad sense. This is far from unfamiliar, but it does represent a new mode of detaching what is 'popular' from what is specialist and critical within art and visual culture, particularly in Britain. The willingness of the BBC to let Rolf Harris expound upon modern art is the reductio ad absurdium of the set of arguments that the BBC has used recently against the Open University's modern art course in an effort to replace academic presenters with celebrities: the pleasures of art are too important, the argument goes, to let its complexities and difficulties be disfigured by those who talk up such difficulties professionally - artists included. The 'celebrity' is now the ur-democratic voice of anti-specialist and populist opinion. This is because the celebrity's high-recognition factor is held to secure an unassailable truthfulness in a world where such truthfulness is taken to be rare or unpredictable: the celebrity's voice is the secure, non-partisan imprimatur of authenticity. In this way celebrity now functions in a quasi-Bonapartist fashion. It speaks to the popular classes over and above the

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[84] Rolf Harris's web-site, quoted in the *Evening Standard*, London,31 July, 2002, p41

professional languages of cultural elites. The celebrity offers programme makers a voice of authority that is uncontaminated by the 'vested interests' of traditional or sceptical commentors on art alike, from a popularizer of the treasures of the Western artistic canon like Kenneth Clark, to the demotic initiator into modern art's quizzical pathways like John Berger. By being unconstrained by such hierarchies and divisions the celebrity's status is seen as a guarantee of the immanent value of the work under discussion. As a result the artwork can be freed up for the popular audience and allowed to stand 'for itself' without the perversity of elaborate argument or justification. In other words, the 'celebrity' confers truthfulness on the words he or she speaks by dint of the ineluctable aura of celebrity itself.

This substitution of the celebrity voice for the popular-critical or specialist voice is contained primarily within the arts and culture, where the views of the specialist, particular the theoretically trained specialist, are seen as an imposture or irrelevance in the face of the would-be subjective content of all interpretation. This substitution is not so common in the hard sciences where the work of the scientist, as the positivized advocate of a veridical notion of truth, tends to be honoured in all its enigmatic complexity. The question of violence against meaning, history, intentionality, therefore, is not ideologically heteronomous, but confined predominantly to those disciplines where notions of positivized truth are weak or unavailable - as in art history, cultural studies and the humanities generally. The contested claims to truth in science are not so easily banished or ridiculed by the authority of the Bonapartist celebrity voice without a greater violence being done to capitalism's structural investment in science and technology. For instance, the anti-scientific posturing of creationism, despite its toleration by the state, is ill-suited to being a *popular* voice, that is, it is too desecularizing and anti-scientific and therefore, at an important level, antithetical to the broad ideological sweep of contemporary social democracy.

The left recently has certainly had much to say on the 'celebrity' voice. But, beyond the routine denunciations of 'dumbing down' it doesn't really know what to do with the phenomenon's ideological fallout. It can't be seen to be defending some revived notion of high-culture without sounding crusty, elitist and Fabian, yet it cannot quite bring itself to attack popular culture head on without feeling that it will get left behind. It ends up, therefore, aligning itself with some form of soft anti-intellectualism (we need more art with accessible, user-friendly intellectual contextualization) rather than with the more brutal and comical anti-intellectualism of the celebrity mongers (we need more art talk but with all the idea-stuff expunged). This is largely because the debate on culture in the mass media is now largely framed without any commitment to the clash and dispute of actual cultural agents. In Kenneth Clark's view of Western culture, for the critic to pick out what has value is to defend a cultural space where Europeanised civilising forms of artistic attention might contest the demise of the cultured ideal of the bourgeois spectator. In Berger's view of Western culture, for the critic to pick out what has value is to reflect on how complex and uncertain this defence of value actually is and therefore how much of a problem value is for bourgeois culture. Today though these two options - one affirmative of the highest reaches of the canon, the other critical of what those reaches might actually be - have long gone as openly stated and contested positions. Indeed, both conservative defenders and critics of the canon have become politically unmoored from their traditional and refractory constituencies: the culturally backward looking fraction of the bourgeoisie; and the would-be culturally progressive fraction of the labour movement. Now this is not to mourn the demise of these positions, as if a slanging match between defenders of bourgeois high culture and some politicized version of the social history of art, says everything there is to say about the Western canon, value, cultural division and modernism. Just as it would be imprudent to say that these positions do not continue to have an 'afterlife' in the highest reaches of university life (for example Harold Bloom's overbearing defence of the Western literary canon) or in the nether regions of contemporary

Trotskyism (high culture is good; high culture with political brass knobs on even better). But as social forces their demise as 'world views' is all apparent. Hence the unabashed confidence that the market apparatchiks demonstrate in employing Rolf Harris as a popular interpreter of modern art: the defence of high-culture is a joke; the critique of bourgeois high culture a bore; what is needed is all-round ecumenical enthusiasm; it is openness and charitableness that bridges divides and sutures enmities. In this respect the selection of Harris is a symptom of a more familiar ideological move in contemporary social democracy. In the place of culture as site of combativeness and opposition (no matter how cartoon-like) culture becomes the site of a post-class détente between high and low, expert and non-specialist, popular and elitist, modernism and its critics. In short the debate on culture is a place where all division, exclusion and hierarchy is reduced to a refulgent inclusivity. Because everything has its value - high and low - all cultural activity and forms can live off each other in a pan-historical multicultural *melange*. On this basis it is no surprise that sections of the left are good at condemning the contemporary market-populist mediation of art and culture, but less successful at thinking through the implications of this critique. Enfeebled by a residual anti-intellectualism, they don't know who they want to speak for and what cultural values they want to defend. In fact, in their fear of elitism, and in their half-hearted genuflection in front of popular culture, they end up cheering the Bonapartists on from the sidelines: keep politics out of art.

Culture and the new democracy

In isolating this small, interpretative drama from the wider changes and challenges of contemporary culture, I am not taking the contemporary (UK) mediation of art on TV as a sign of irredeemable cultural decline or as an evidence of the final demise of modernism and the avant-garde in front of an imbecilic mass culture. On the contrary, as the main channel of social democratic consensus this is what TV is largely organized to do on a global basis: to de-

agentify and diminish the diremptive content of social experience and cultural form. Asking Rolf Harris to be a gate-keeper for an (unconscious) deideologization of art, then, is hardly out of keeping with these forces. Rather what concerns me here, is the contemporary context in which this process now occurs, as the basis for a wider discussion of the depoliticization of culture. Thus, what is so shameless about the above is that for those who defended this series, and those who criticised it sardonically, the vacuousness of its content, in the end, didn't seem to matter that much, in fact, at some level it is possible to say that for critics and defenders alike its content may well have been vacuous, but, nevertheless overall the programmes were sensitive to the needs of their audience. This isn't just populism then - the distillation of scholarship into simple narratives and digestible and tendentious facts - but an unembarrassed refusal to practice any of the skills of historical description and critical attentiveness. In this respect, both the retarded indifference to the representation of agency and intention, and the merely benign disapproval of this indifference's stupefying effects, compels us to look deeper and wider than the usual arguments about the TV's ideological conformities in our examination of the symptoms of contemporary culture.

The popular representation of art and culture is now not just part of what nominally is called the society of spectacle, but is actually contiguous with the depoliticizing functions of contemporary social democracy itself. Since the 1980s, and particular, since the end of 'historical communism' in Eastern Europe, the immanent depoliticizing logic of capitalist democracy has strengthened its hold on the political process, social and cultural policy and mass representations of culture generally. This depoliticizing logic turns essentially on the management of the crisis of consensus through the endless reinscription of consensus, that is, the through a normative diffusion of conflict under the sign of 'difference'. The expulsion and marginalization of discourses of crisis that involve a systemic opposition and critique of capitalism or introduce division as a

non-subsumptive category has been one of the major casualties of these processes. Revolutionary and socialist traditions of thought and practice have found themselves hounded from the academy by the right and centre-left alike, and ridiculed and suppressed in public life as outmoded, crude and lacking 'realism'. This erosion of politics as site of division and collective grievance has been welcomed and defended not just by the right, always evanescent about the collapse of class-based politics, but by most of the left keen to retransform 'left' social democracy into an electable form. The defence of social democratic consensus in the1990s has been tenacious, therefore, as remnants of the old laborist left across Europe have sought to identify themselves with the interests of the market, and increasingly with the monopolistic forces of globalization. This new class détente (accompanied by a mass shift in wealth from the working class to the middle-class since the early 1980s) has been driven by a concerted attack on the left in parliamentary constituencies, trade unions and within the public services. As such it is no surprise that there is an increasing abstention of voters from the political process at national elections and on a local basis through trade unions, across much of Europe (with the partial exception of France),[85] and in the US, where for twenty years or more there has been mass working class withdrawal from the voting process. Moreover, it is also no surprise that what seems to have been the victory of the professionalization of politics over collective forms of self-activity, has generated a widespread endorsement of the 'end of politics' itself. Indeed this endorsement of the 'end of politics'(as the clash of classes; the insuperability of the market) as a new vision of the 'end of history' found its most perfected form in the 1990s from within the very heart of this professionalized political clerisy; Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History?' (1989).[86] Many others, particularly on the left, have followed this line hollowing

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[85] For instance, the higher than average turn out in the recent Presidential elections in France; and the fact that despite the reality of the large vote for the fascist Le Pen in the first round of the election, there was also a high turn out for far left and revolutionary candidates.

[86] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, Summer 1989

out the divisions and conflicts of the present in the name of the ineluctability of contemporary social democracy. This kind of thinking has also found its way into the analysis of culture, no more so than in the UK and the US, where the discipline of cultural studies, with its increasing emphasis on semiotic models of cultural resistance, cultural hybridity and the politics of difference, found a ready set of allies and comforting points of 'post-Marxist' reference. Indeed the success of cultural studies in the UK and the US in the 1980s and 1990s provided a home for those who had abandoned class politics, or rather, who saw cultural politics as a means of continuing politics by 'other means'. In the process culture and politics both suffered. Culture was divested of concepts of reification, alienation and division (in the name of multicultural inclusivity) and politics was delivered over to forms of micrological dissent. This story, of course, is now a very familiar one, especially for those on the left who have lived through it, and have been critical of its trajectory.

Yet if this story presents us with a powerful succession of images of closure, abandonment, and absence, this is less because these images are the result of some terrible historical trauma, some sundering of the contemporary from the past, than the result of the ratcheting up of the consensual management of the crisis of consensus in a period of massive capitalist reorganization. Since the mid-seventies, in conditions of repeated economic recession, capitalism has fought a long, drawn out, and relatively successful battle for political and cultural restitution. The G8 economies led by the US have been successful in weakening the post-war, statist concessions to popular and collective forms of social provision through identifying democracy with market choice. During this period, however, the usual enemies and critics of the market on the left have, in fact, been some of the most impassioned advocates of this new settlement. The defence of market socialism has of course been part of the broad church of social democracy in the 20th century. Yet, in the 1990s, left social democracy's unambiguous commitment to the market and consumer choice is unprecedented.

The market, particular in the area of cultural services and broadcasting (satellite and cable TV), has been taken as heralding a new era of consumer democracy. Contemporary cultural studies, then, has not lagged far behind in coming to theorise this new cultural terrain as a space in which the cultural consumers are now free to choose and manipulate symbolic goods (symbolic capital) in their own name. Obviously not all of the post-labourist new left is sanguine about the immediate consequences of this new settlement (the fact that claims to choice and difference are channelled through the global expansion of Anglo-American mass culture and post-adolescent taste remains a strong focus of anti-corporate sentiment). Nevertheless, the actuality of this expanded image reproduction and distribution is held to be broadly progressive insofar as it has cemented the shift away from forms of state paternalism and 'inflexible' collective identities to the creative and motile dictates of the consumer. Democracy and consumerism are mutually reinforced. This widespread defection to the market by the left has underwritten the management of the crisis of consensus through consensus. In fact, it has been instrumental in securing a bipartisan ideological grip on political debate across all the social democratic parties in the West and the southern asian economies. Even debates on 'green issues' and 'ecology' are repeatedly deflated by the new left in order to accommodate the pan-national agendas of the corporations.

The ferocious intensity with which capitalism now pursues this consensual management of the crisis of consensus is the terrain upon which politics and cultural politics has been conducted since the mid-1980s. It would be foolish to underestimate, therefore, how successful this "labour of restoration"[87] has been. The gridlocking of the political process into a debate on 'rights' and 'community' has drained political discourse of an 'outside' to the due process of social democracy. But, capitalist order may impose itself but it doesn't necessarily

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[87] Dominque Lecourt, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy Since the Mid-1970s*, translated by Gregory Elliot, Verso 2001, p134

govern. That is, the weakness of capitalism - and paradoxically what drives its consensual logic - is that it cannot completely control the subjectivity of those without power that it seeks to represent under this model of democratic assimilation. The logic of inclusivity is always breaking down, or rather, more accurately, exists in a perpetual state of fungibility, constantly forcing the defenders of bourgeois democracy to recalibrate and extend who or what it means by the 'people' and 'community'. The history of capitalism is history of the revolutionary disruption and negation of these categories under their constant ideological adaption and renormalization. In this way the continuation of politics, and therefore, the destablization of the idea of post-politics, is bound up precisely with how the determinate political act and social agency are understood within the historical framework of this process of bourgeois assimilation and would-be failure. 1848, 1871, 1917, 1956, 1968, 1974, 1989 are not just the dates of attempted and actual revolution and acts of class resistance, but more precisely, direct collective interventions into an objective historical process. By this I mean men and women openly disregarded what was 'objectively' not possible in order to put in place an unnamed process of political transformation. In this the historical 'failure' or dissolution or 'success' of these moments needs to be placed against the important fact of their 'wilful' agency. That is, such moments were not the outcome of an ideal, objective set of conditions which allowed a class or set of social agents to act in their best interests, but the result of a practical willingness on the part of those agents to seize the moment in the hope of transforming themselves and the nature of the political process. In this sense the historical process produces moments which present collective historical agents with a significant choice: to either accept the would-be objective nature of a given situation, or break the logic of this objectivity in the name of a new logic and a new objectivity. Hence *all* political, cultural and social interventions are at some significant level premature, that is, without guarantees. But if this prematurity *remains* largely premature - socially undetermined - under normal conditions of social reproduction and the balance of class forces, this does not

mean that the act or event cannot have productive, determinate effects under these conditions. Indeed the power of an intervention can have an impact that far outweighs its actual and immediate transformative consequences, for example, the Situationist interventions in and around the Sorbonne in Paris during May 68. However, since the late1920s and the epoch of Stalinism and the post-war rise of plural social democracy, the immanent force of this radical subjectivity has been systematically downgraded on the left, even more so after May 1968, whose 'failure' has set the tone for so much contemporary post-political theory and the fracturing of political agency into cultural agency. Within both left social democracy and reformist socialist traditions, the disruptive, transcendentalizing power of revolutionary subjectivity has either been demonized as a form of misdirected 'spontanenism' or reduced to an enfeebled after image of past struggle, that may give a warm glow to comrades in the present but is no longer relevant. The link between practical agency and the transformation of what stands as 'objective', which Georg Lukács, developed in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923)[88] against the dictates of orthodox Marxism, has been forced into the margins of ultraleftism or even more crudely anarchism. Yet it is only through the repositioning and retheorization of the interdependence of agency and class consciousness that the spectral hold of theories of commodity fetishism can be broken, and the historical process opened up to the active self-consciousness of historical agents. The story of contemporary capitalism's 'restitution' is a story therefore that certainly needs to be told from the point of view of the success of the commodity form - from a point of view inside of Rolf Harris's web site, so to speak - but also, more poignantly, from the point of view of the commodity form's potential fragility.

This fundamental truth appears to have undergone a new critical and theoretical life recently. A commitment to radical subjectivity, to the immanent force of

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[88] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, 1971

human freedom and social agency, has been one of the unifying factors in recent political philosophy and social theory's critique of the new capitalist restoration, or counter-reformation. Indeed, at the point where capitalism has been most successful at producing a 'post-political culture' in response to the governing consensus, and at the point where the academy under the auspices of postmodernism has been prepared to go along with aspects of this, there has been a vigorous renewal of revolutionary and (early) Marxist modes of thought and practice across a range of political traditions and disciplines. This has much to do with the conjunction of two post-68s political traditions' as they have joined the growing diaspora of political energies formed by the twin crises of Stalinism and social democracy after 1989, now nominally known as the anti-globalization movement: an Autonomist Marxism and a post, post-Althusserianism. Autonomist Marxism has its origins in the revolutionary politics in Italy in the early seventies, and post, post-Althusserianism emerges in France in the early1980s out of the debris of Maoism and the critique of Althusser and 'scientific' Marxism. Both are products of very different, even opposed, theoretical traditions - autonomist theory is indebted to an anti-Hegelian (really anti-Stalinist) 'anti-dialectical' Marxism, PPA, is indebted to Hegel and early German idealism - but both place a great stress on the immanent force of subjectivity and worker's self-activity. In this regard, the anti-globalization movement has fed off both these traditions, and at the same time foregrounded and reinvigorated them, insofar, as the movement has emerged in ways that have at an important level confirmed these traditions perspectives: the necessity for direct activity outside, and in general opposition to, official parties of the left. What distinguishes the movement, then, is that it was formed and guided by those who made little or no concessions to the gridlocked mentality of social democratic power and its extraparliamentary opposition. However, even if the anti-globalization movement demonstrates the force of some of the theses of autonomist politics and PPA political philosophy, it is not the case that these exhaust or somehow represent the anti-globalization movement. On the contrary,

in most instances the concept of self-activity is theorized against all extant political traditions, in a kind of gestural avant-gardism. Yet what unites the general force of the movement and allows disparate marginal workers' traditions to be pulled into its orbit is precisely this issue of radical subjectivity. In this article I am less interested in what is made theoretically of this subjectivity by groups and individuals within the anti-globalization movement - much of which verges on pre-Marxist idealism - than in the theoretical possibilities of radical subjectivity itself. First and foremost, then, we need to be clear about what this irruption of activity has opened out philosophically, culturally and politically for discussion in relation to the question of subjectivity and social agency.

The reconstitution of the revolutionary political subject is not a reconstitution of the self-identical subject. Rather what distinguishes the new autonomist writing and PPA is something more precise and more demanding: the subject's *irreducible finitude,* that is, its unifying negative and diremptive content. In this way recent political philosophy and theory has rediscovered an 'existential' model of the political act whose claims to spontaneity is not an effect of the misrecognition of an 'objective' process - a pseudo-event so to speak - but an ethical terrain for the genuinely interruptive and destablizing act, the act that forces through and breaks the deadlock of official channels of mediation. This radical subjectivity is not to be confused with subjectivization of politics in post-structuralism and its idealist cognates that has dominated left-thinking in the academy and the 'artworld' in the late 1980s and 1990s. Whereas atomistic, anti-dialectical thinkers such as Deleuze, disperse the subjective act into a constellation of points of resistance as a perpetual transgression of the Law, other recent non-atomistic models of political philosophy have sought to redirect notions of resistance and agency away from false subversions of the symbolic to the idea of the 'break' and 'rupture' as a fidelity to the idea of a universal freedom. The sources for this political philosophy, distributed across a number of authors, and traditions, are multiform and therefore do not by any means share a

common political heritage, or feed homogeneously into this notion of freedom: Hegel, early Marx and Lukács, figure prominently, but so do also Schelling, Spinoza, Korsch, Benjamin, the Situationists, and even artificial intelligence theorists and cognitive psychologists. Yet, what unites these disparate sources is a widespread antipathy to two powerful structuring intellectual forces that have shaped much of the cultural terrain and the possibilities of radical agency since 1968: the notion of 'instrumental reason' (as it was Marxified in Althussser, re-Weberianized in Foucault, and is now being enculturated in post-Adornian contemporary critical theory) and the depositivized, counter-hegemonic subversion of 'instrumental reason' in post-structuralism (the rejection of the philosophic triad of structure, subject and totality). Jettisoning both the view of modernity as an iron cage of reason, and its reified opposition in the idea of the deterritorialized subject, the force of this writing lies in its restitution of the transcendental, universalizing meaning of the contingent political and cultural act. And this is precisely is what is so significant about the anti-globalization movement: in framing political intervention directly through global capitalism, the space and agency of politics is again opened out to a universal and universalizing terrain of understanding. Thus, if the late 1980s and 90s has been witness to the rise of various apologetic sociological and cultural practices on the basis of the radical contingency or the implicit failure of the revolutionary act, it has also been a period in which a nascent set of critical traditions and practices which have refused to settle for a 'perverse' disruption of the symbolic have found new ground. In this regard, I want to look at this loose grouping of traditions and practices as the basis for a analysis of the development of art and culture in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium, and their viability for a political critique of the consensual management of the crisis of consensus now. However, this is not a map for political praxis, or an uplifting account of the cultural possibilities of the anti-globalization movement. Rather it is reckoning with the recent past as a way of opening up the present, in conditions where past and present remain opposed under the hard and indefatigable logic of

consensus.

Subjectivity, agency, labour

Recent autonomist thinking on subjectivity and social agency perhaps finds its most cogent expression, in the much discussed, much lauded, *Empire* (2000) by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. Negri's early involvement in the Italian autonomist movement clearly defines the content of *Empire's* theses, and gives its political positions their teleological confidence. The book has done much philosophically to broker the radical subjectivity of the new extra-parliamentary left politics. Indeed, remarkably, *Empire,* now seems to have replaced other sanctified critical-theoretical texts (such as *Anti-Oedipus*) as the new bible of action amongst a new generation of cultural practioners and artists trying to work their way out of the postmodernization of the subject. I am not so much interested in the problems relating to how *Empire's* theses are being applied in contemporary cultural practice than in the synthesising moves the text makes against prevailing postmodern orthodoxies. In this, the political, economic and philosophical weaknesses of the book are less important than its organizing function for debate, activity, speculation. Such texts are rare; when they arrive, therefore, they should be given their full pedagogic due. Ironically, as Althusser once argued: the theoretical efficacy of a text is produced through its unpredictable effects rather than its proclaimed self-sufficiency. *Empire* is a highly sufficient-insufficient text, so to speak, which as a consequence *brings on* the pressing debate on subjectivity and social agency. Hardt's and Negri's argument is broadly the following: under late capitalism and globalization the disciplinary society of the universal commodity form has passed into a system of total, integrated control. Yet at the same time, because the commodity form envelops all aspects of social life a plurality of subjectivities continually emerge to resist and transform this constellation of powers. The actuality of resistance, dissent, negation, then, is no longer marginal - that is confined to revolutionary

workers, radicals, intellectual, artists - on the edges of working class and bourgeois life, but is active in the centre of society and the daily experience of broad swathes of the masses on a global scale. The task of the revolutionary left, then, is to connect with these immanent forces of resistance and dissent in order to produce the conditions for subjectivities that will actually contest commodity fetishism and the global regime of homogenisation. For Hardt and Negri, however, this does not mean a simplistic defence of the 'local' or micrological as a means of preserving the heterogeneous against the homogeneous. By arguing for the 'local' against the 'global' the activist and intellectual actually preserves and rearms those heterogenizing force which drives the homogenizing logic of the market. It is better, they argue, to "enter the terrain of Empire, and confront its homogenizing and heterogenizing flows in all their complexity".[89] In this they take a sharp philosophical and political distance from the micrological content of postmodernism and a Deleuzian poststructuralism, (even if much of the language and structure of the book is derived from an anti-dialectical philosophy of immanence). The authors argue that their methodology moves beyond a "a critical and material deconstructionism"[90] to unite a critical and deconstructive model with a model which is constructive and ethico-political. In other words their model of subjectivity, social agency, and class consciousness, is, in the tradition of Lukács' defence of the radical interjunction of pure reason and practical reason in Marx, first and foremost a *productive* category. In this regard, their Marxism is quite orthodox in the face of postmodernist modes: self-consciousness directly changes its object as part of practice. But what subverts this orthodoxy and makes the book highly tendentious as a defence of radical subjectivity and workers' self-activity are the ends to which the productivity of consciousness is put to work. Hardt and Negri argue that what has driven the reform and restructuring of capitalism since WW11, but particularly since the

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[89] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire,* Harvard University Press, 2000, p46

[90] Hardt and Negri, ibid, p48

early 1970s - and therefore is indivisible from the logic of globalization - is the struggle of labour itself - its productivity, its resistances, its demands for social reform. Capitalism's survival and success has been depedendent, in their view, on its negotiation and struggle with the negative power of labour. For example, the resistance to Fordist forms of factory organization in the late 1960s - as part of a wider counter-cultural struggle against capitalist rationality - was instrumental in contributing to the shift in production in the1980s towards a more flexible and informational model and to increased concessions in the workplace. This model of the ontological primacy of the constitutive power of labour is rightly placed by Hardt and Negri at the centre of the process of capital accumulation. But the notion of labour *resisting* capital is overstated. Capital sustains itself by expropriating the labour-power of the mass of workers; and the withdrawal of workers labour-power is a destablizing reality for capitalists. But this does not mean that the forms of capital as a social relation have no significance. That is, capital accumulation is as much driven by the competition between capitals as it is by class struggle (strikes, acts of sabotage etc).[91] Struggles may provoke and extend a crisis for capital, but they do not determine the logic of the system. Furthermore, because Hardt and Negri's model of the constitutive power of labour fails to take any serious account of the defeat of labour in the 1970s and 1980s, capital's drive to the casualisation of labour is written out of capital's new flexible model of production. As a consequence the authors misjudge the impact of immaterial labour (computer-based production) on the new forces and relations of production. Because the productivity of immaterial labour is difficult to measure, the law of value, they argue, is no longer operative in its classical form. But immaterial labour is only a fraction of the global labour force, and therefore any inflation of its impact distorts the reality of the global division of labour.

These criticisms reflect unavoidable shortcomings in Hardt and Negri's theory of

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[91] See Peter Green, 'The Passage from Imperialism to Empire: A Commentary on *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Historical Materialism*, Vol 10, Issue 1, 2002

the constitutive power of labour. Their concept of labour in struggle undertheorises the power of ideology, and separates labour from the relations of capital (labour exists *within* capitalist forms of constraint). But if these criticisms are meant to challenge the recidivist postmodernism of their growing band of cultural interpreters (Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labour is unfortunately a boon to idealist apologists of the 'information age') this does not meant that their model of radical subjectivity does not have significant strengths. For what is powerful about *Empire* is that the content of subjectivity (specifically proletarian subjectivity or what they call the subjectivity of the "multitude", after Spinoza) is treated as a real, excessive force in the face of reification and the dominant order. And this is key to what I mean by radical subjectivity being central to recent political philosophy and theory's critique of the new capitalist restoration: negation is not nihilistic decomposition of meaning and agency, but a self-transformative, emancipatory social force. [92] This shifts an understanding of the place of struggle from the reformist leadership of the working class and its intellectual allies back to the disparate, unformed energies, experiences, and collective intellectual capacities of the working-class itself. The theory of the constitutive power of labour, then, is a way of bringing theories of class activity back into political view in a period in which the creative power of the working class has been written out of the political and cultural concerns of the left. And it is these concerns which have also preoccupied PPA, in particular the work of Jacques Rancière, and also, recently, Slavoj Zizek, in the areas of political philosophy and the philosophy of the subject respectively.

Since the late 1970s Rancière has developed a critique of Althusser on the basis of a critique of the self-identity of working class *as* a labouring class. As Rancière said in 1977, the understanding of the working class, "must be traversed by

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[92] For a critical realist reading of negation as a productive force, see Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, Verso, 1993

something else, for it not to be the thought of a class collaboration".[93] That is, the real revolutionary threat to the existing order comes about when workers challenge the boundaries between primary producer and intellectual, worker and bourgeois, and thereby destabilise the division of labour which produces the self-identity of the worker *as* worker. Rancière has devoted a large amount of theoretical energy to recovering the experiences and writings of those workers (particularly in France in the early part of the 19th century when the identity of the working class as a labouring class was being formed) who, in their intellectual ambitions and cultural creativity, refused to settle for the passive, anti-intellectual images of their own class constructed by both their official 'left' representatives and the emergent bourgeoisie. This critique of proletarian identity from within has important epistemological implications, therefore, for the notion of radical subjectivity and social agency. By rejecting their assignment to their 'proper' place workers thereby carry out Marx's universal emancipation of labour at the level of intellectual desire. The worker not only needs scientific and scholarly knowledge, but also the opportunity to "entertain and maintain his passions and desires for another world. Otherwise the constraints of labour will level them down to the mere instinct for survival and subsistence".[94] The similarities here with Hardt and Negri are obvious. However, what distinguishes Rancière's position from their's is that the organization of this productive desire is formed and sustained by the intellectual achievements of bourgeois culture. Proletarian desire is cathected to the world of bourgeois achievements, that is, to the social and creative accomplishments of the educated and politically conscious middle class. For it is the 'otherness' of bourgeois accomplishment that secures the negation of the present social reality. This is close to Hegel's reading of proletarian struggle and identity: that what the proletariat wants is not all that

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[93] Jacques Rancière, 'De Pelloutiers à Hitler: Syndicalisme et collaboration', *Les Révoltes Logiques* 4, Winter 1977, p61, quoted in Donald Reid, Introduction, Ranciere, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth Century France*, translated from the French by John Dury, Temple University Press, 1989.

[94] *The Nights of Labor*, ibid, p20

different from what the bourgeoisie wants.[95] Marx rejected the non-revolutionary implications this out of hand, for good reason - the emancipation of labour can not be built out of a bourgeois defence of the capitalist state - but nevertheless, Marx was still left on the other side with the problem of the conflictual formation of class subjectivity and social agency. The divided nature of class subjectivity, then, is something that many Marxisms overwhelmingly preoccupied with the 'ideal' worker or 'collective worker' have avoided or occluded, for fear of touching on the 'bad', 'improper' or 'dissolute' worker. Rancière puts it succinctly: where did the workers movement "get the idea that workers cannot simultaneously love bourgeois people, and so battle with them"?[96] This idea of proletarian culture operating homopathically within bourgeois culture's own conflictual domain, recovers a dialectical-genealogical understanding of revolutionary identity. Proletarian aspirations intermesh with bourgeois ideals at the point where they contest such ideals. Or rather proletarian desires for another world are mediated by these ideals. In this way we are able to clarify where the emancipatory and universal content of this process of identification and disidentification with the bourgeoisie actually lies: the refusal to participate in work solely as workers.

The production of a theory of the political subject out of the immanent negativity of selfhood is also what governs Slavoj Zizek's recent attack on postmodern politics and culture. As with Hardt and Negri, and Rancière, Zizek develops an account of the subject which is 'excessive' to its own social causes, enabling a fissure to open up in the objectivity of the real - although in his writing there is no theory of the labouring subject as such. Rather, what preoccupies Zizek is the ontological ground of this excessiveness on the terrain of contemporary consumer culture, what we might describe, in Hegelian fashion, as the labour of cultural

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[95] For a reading of this issue see, David MacGregor, *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx*, University of Toronto Press, 1984.

[96] *The Nights of Labor*, op cit, p22

subjectivity.

For Zizek the decentred postmodern subject represents a fundamental philosophical misunderstanding about consciousness and selfhood. In rejecting the notion of a core, self-transparent subject and advocating subjectivity as a shifting constellation of subject-positions, post-Oedipal, postmodernist thinking on consciousness has emptied the theory of the subject of its ambiguous relationship with symbolic authority. The critique of authority is transformed into a compulsive, atomistic transgression of the Law. In this way the 'freedoms' identified with this subject in postmodernism simply replicate the polymorphous perverse subject of late capitalist multiculturalism: the subject who identifies freedom and the subversion of authority with the jouissance of difference and the repetitive injunction to enjoy. Zizek rejects this on the grounds that this dispersal of the subject avoids a crucial negative feature of subjectivity which forms an unacknowledged kernel of the cogito: its capacity for irreconcilable negativity, that is of being *out of joint* with the world, what Hegel once described as the powerful 'dismembering' function of the Imagination (the decomposing aspects of consciousness).[97] Zizek, however, goes one better than Hegel and views this process as a primordial force of the pre-synthetic consciousness itself, a force which continually tears the fabric of intuition apart and reassembles patterns of meaning. In this way he asks: which of the two axes of consciousness (as proposed by German idealism and inherited by Marx) are of primary importance, the Imagination or the Understanding? Zizek doesn't so much plump for the one against the other as relocate the disruptive force of the Imagination within the synthesising force of Understanding. As he argues "the unity of the subject endeavours to impose on the sensuous multitude via its synthetic activity is always erratic, eccentric, unbalanced, 'unsound', something that is extremely and

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[97] GWF Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977

violently imposed on to the multitude".[98] Contra Kant, the Understanding and Imagination exist in a brute tension, or rather the Understanding's drive to synthesis is the continuous outcome of the destablizing work of the Imagination. What is stake here then, above all else, is an argument about political and revolutionary temporality. In the postmodernist schema of 'interminable subversion' nothing *truly new* can really come of the subject's resistance to the Law. Resistance and desire are subordinated to the facticity of the moment. The subliminal content of the theory of the irreconciled subject, on the other hand, produces a rupture in the natural and social chain of causality. The subject's irreconcilability with the reality opens or suspends the self-enclosed content of reality, allowing the possibility of fidelity to a transcendent or revolutionary politics.[99] In short, for Zizek the subject is a subject who is not yet caught up in the web of social necessity.

Zizek's theory of revolutionary subjectivity, as with Hardt and Negri, reinvokes the latent power of the revolutionary will. However, this latent power is not without its problems. If Hardt and Negri's radical subjectivity separates working class resistance too easily from the structural relations of capital, Zizek's decisionism suffers from a weak location within institutional-political realities. Indeed, a paradox arises. In disentangling the irreconcilable negativity of the subject from the forces of social reduction, the social agency of the subject becomes abstract and ungrounded. This leaves hanging in the air a familiar set of Marxian issues around structure and agency, class subjectivity and collective class consciousness. Agency is not opposed to structure (social practice), but is actually the outcome of structure. Human actions take place under conditions

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[98] Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Verso 1999, p33

[99] That is, a fidelity to the revolutionary event. In this regard Zizek reworks Badiou's notion of the fiduciary Event, which the subject, in act of authentic identification, is compelled to internalize and repose, as the universal horizon of Truth. See Alain Badiou, *L'etre et l'événement*, Editions de Seuil, 1988

which are determined *by* structures, that is, the possibilities for action are based on, and embedded in, the structural capacities and resources possessed by agents. This means that agency and structure are interrelated in the realisation of needs, wants, desires.[100] As two of Zizek's critics, Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau argue it is not possible to invoke the subject as the ground of agency given that the subject is produced out of a primary and delimiting set of power relations. The subject's capacity for decision-making is always organized through and against a background of social practices. No subject's power of decision, therefore, is ever *ex nihilo*, but a displacement within existing social relations. This means the subject is only ever *partially* a subject.[101] But it is this invocation of the subject as a partial subject that is also precisely the problem philosophically with this position. In locating the subject in a chain of discursive displacements a kind of pacification of the irreconcilability of subjectivity takes place. The intransigent, disarticulatory act does not just emerge and live within a fixed set of horizons, continually called back passively to buttress its contours, but is able to redefine and shift the objectivity of those horizons. The irreconcilable content of Zizek's concept of the subject is what makes his theory in the end a more powerful political candidate: it fixes on those moments of rupture, breakdown, failure that generates a productive denaturalization of capitalist reality.

Negation, production, the avant-garde

Limitations and problems aside, then, what makes Zizek's and Hardt's and Negri's respective defences of radical subjectivity particularly important for cultural theory is that they openly theorize negation as a constitutive experiential

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[100] For a nuanced discussion of agency and structure see, Alex Callinicos, *Making History,* Polity Press, 1987

[101] See, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogue on the Left*, Verso 2000

category. In my view, this is an urgent issue in the light of the narration of modernism and the avant-garde as exhausted ideologies within postmodern cultural studies, the new art history and radical art history alike, for what these disciplines have successfully produced in conjunction with dominant social theory is the *deontologization of negation.* Negation in art theory and cultural theory has been stripped of its constitutive subjectivities and installed as a reductive formal category. These arguments tend to have the following logic: the novelty, disorder, and non-trivial experimentation of modern art is so diminished in its impact as to be completely unidentifiable with the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, consequently, talk of the neo-avant-garde can only prolong the agony of this decline, a desperate recuperation of what remains irrecuperable. As Eric Hobsbawm has argued recently, "The avant-garde schools since the 1960s -since Pop Art - [are] no longer in the business of revolutionizing art, but of declaring its bankruptcy".[102] But what Hobsbawm, the conservative postmodernists, and other critics of the neo-avant-garde such as Peter Bürger fail to understand is that the political and social defeat of the originary avant-garde is not the same thing as the defeat of the *category* of the avant-garde.[103] The failed actuality of the one does not necessarily mean the failed productivity of the other, because the avant-garde is itself the product of its later theorization. Hence, in the 1960s at the point where the avant-garde was being reconstituted and rehistoricized as a political project across various artistic practices (structuralist cinema, the Situationist International, conceptual art) the historical and conceptual framework of key works from the 1920s and 1930s were being made available for the first time. A striking discrepancy or conflict is put in place: at the same time as the concept of the avant-garde is being made available to a new generation - let us remember artists in the sixties and the seventies had very little working knowledge of Soviet

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[102] Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind The Times, The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth Century Avant-Gardes*, Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture, Thames & Hudson, 1998

[103] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1974], University of Minnesota Press, 1984

and Weimar avant-garde practice - it was also being abandoned as a viable model theoretically by writers such as Bürger. The post-war neo-avant-gardes, therefore, are not *failed rehearsals* of older practices, but the affirmation of what is judged to be living and available for further development in these practices. The concept of the avant-garde is given work to do, rather than revisited as a 'style' or set of styles. This sense of the neo-avant-garde as a product of critical and productive *reinscription* is absent from Bürger because the category of historical failure outweighs any redemptive model of practice and interpretation.

In this respect the contribution of Adorno in the first wave of discussion on the avant-garde in the sixties is crucial to understanding the lopsided direction this debate took, and the limitations of Bürger and contemporary anti-avant-gardists. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970)[104] Adorno recognises the historical defeat of the Soviet and Weimar avant-gardes and the present impossibility of art's critical *sublation* into life. But, rather than sacrificing the negativity of the avant-garde to some untroubled notion of 'political art' or conservative restitution of an older modernism, he rearticulates the question of the avant-garde on the terrain of art's autonomy. He argues that with the consumerist assimilation of art into the capitalist 'everyday' and with the erosion of an older notion of modernist autonomy, both autonomy and the avant-garde are mutually transformed. The mediating force of this mutual transformation is what he calls the 'new'. By the 'new' Adorno does not mean the merely modish, but a subjective agency by which art is compelled to retain its critical independence from the forces of unreason, social and aesthetic. The 'new', or the differential, wills non-identity just as the drive to non-identity wills the 'new'. As such the 'new' is the necessary outcome of the art object itself, the 'thing' yet to come that the artist wishes to bring about but does not know in what form he or she will bring it about.

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[104] References in this essay from the first English translation.Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*,[1970], translated by C.Lenhardt, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984

Autonomy and the avant-garde, then, are the codeterminate names given to the production of the 'new' as the condition of art's necessary emergence from heteronomy. I would argue, on this basis, that Adorno introduces a distinction between the avant-garde as Event and the avant-garde as the temporal, global experience of modernity. Rather than treating the avant-garde as the failed repetition of an original lost moment, he sees the neo-avant-garde as aesthetically and critically equivalent *to* the early avant-gardes. Accordingly, under conditions of the false sublation of art into everyday life in liberal social democracy the avant-garde is an experience of art's critical persistence, a continual restaging of art's own promise of freedom, the promise of art's reconciliation with collective social experience. In this respect, the question of the avant-garde's vanguard role shifts from the sublation of art under the socialization of technology (as utopianly imagined by Walter Benjamin, but put to cynical work by the cultural industry) to the disaffirmation and rearticulation of modern artistic tradition itself. The 'new' is the repetitive and continuous movement of art's emergence from artistic tradition. In other words, the 'new' lies not in the prospect of formal, 'stylistic' breakthroughs, but in the possibility of keeping alive art's non-identity in the face of its own institutionalization and, as such, in the face of the means-ends rationality of capitalist exchange value. As such these forms will of necessity attach themselves to those resources and practices that will requestion the traditions of which they are part.

This understanding of the avant-garde as an open temporal experience rather than as a failed Event became the basis in the early nineties for a number of revisionist approaches to postmodernism. In response to the melancholic endism of postmodernist theories, that is, theories of the 'end of modernism' and the 'end of art', Hal Foster and Andrew Benjamin both looked to the reinvigoration of the artistic avant-garde as a way of out postmodernism's historicism. In 'What's Neo

About the Neo Avant-Garde?' (1994),[105] Foster adopts the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred meaning) in order to resist Bürger's punctual understanding of the avant-garde. Far from being a moment where the promise of art's sublation is lost, the effects and ideals of the original avant-garde are subject to a process of deferred action. The neo-avant-garde emerges through what Foster calls a process of, "protension and retention, a complex relay of reconstructed past and anticipated future". [106] The pasts of the avant-garde, then are not held in place by mourning, but opened up to reinscription, under changed social and political circumstances. Andrew Benjamin, proposes a similar kind of Freudian model in *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-garde* (1991).[107] In opposition to the notion of the avant-garde's as an enervated tradition he argues that the emergence of the contemporary from the modern - and therefore by definition the emergence of the avant-garde - is never simply a repetition of the past, but its rearticulation, what he calls the possibility of art's "anoriginal difference" in the present. Because history remains open the future meanings of art cannot be determined in advance. The present then is fundamentally open to the risk of new meaning, even if the immediate social and political conditions which determine the conditions of such an action prevent such an action taking place.

What unites Andrew Benjamin and Foster is a revision of the dialectic of the avant-garde. Both see the avant-garde as the promissory space in which art articulates and negotiates its open-ended place within artistic tradition rather than as the agency by which the institutions of art are to be dismantled and sublated into everyday life. The content of the avant-garde's 'after life' then (the Freudian process of deferred meaning) is based on the reworking in a liberal social democratic context dominated by the museum and the mass media of the constitutive cognitive and epistemological breakthroughs and strategies of the

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[105] Hal Foster, 'What's Neo About the Neo Avant-Garde', *October* No.74 Fall 1994

[106] Ibid, p30

[107] Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-garde*, Routledge 1991

early avant-garde (montage, simultaneity, the critique of the author, the use of the ready made). Whereas the original avant-garde identified a revolution in perception with proletarian political revolution, and therefore with the supersession of the museum, the neo-avant-garde identifies the promise of art's difference as a task of counter-representation from within the bourgeois art institution. The neo-avant-garde regrounds the avant-garde within the dynamics of capitalism's 'second-modernity'. On this score, Foster's avant-garde is close to a counter-hegemonic model in which the 'politics of representation' reroute the cognitive and epistemological strategies of the early avant-garde into a form of pluralizing cultural resistance. In Andrew Benjamin the counter-hegemonic model is absent, but the notion of the avant-garde as securing the possibility of art's emergence from heteronomy into difference is very similar. As Benjamin, says the task of art is to affirm the possibility of the plural present.

There is a superficial similarity between Foster and Andrew Benjamin's avant-garde and Adorno's avant-garde. All, in a sense *relativize* the identity of the avant-garde against the notion of the avant-garde as a failed, punctual Event. The absence of the original collective and vanguard character of the original avant-garde in contemporary neo-avant-gardes is not a block on the development of the avant-garde, but the basis by which the avant-garde rethinks its function, suitably qualified. But the implications and outcome are very different between Foster and Andrew Benjamin and Adorno. For Foster and Benjamin the theory of the open-avant-garde is essentially a way of reconstituting the present and futures of art within the boundaries of a stable capitalist art institution. That is, art's emergence from heteronomy into difference is seen as a kind of a differential *handing down* of the past from within artistic tradition. As Foster stresses, contemporary neo-avant-gardes enact the postmodern *continuity* of the early avant-gardes, just as Benjamin describes the contemporary avant-garde in terms of a kind of interdependent pluralizing of inherited tendencies and forms. For Adorno, though, the theory of the open-avant-garde is never so sanguine, because what

Adorno call the "impossible trick"[108] of art constantly trying to identify the non-identical, is an inherently destablizing and self-negating process. Accordingly, there is a strong sense in which the temporality of the avant-garde in Adorno is one riven, ontologically, by internal and external violation, by the symbolic violence of aesthetic ideology - the conflation of art with aesthetics - and the actual violence of the culture industry. The consequence of this is that the emergence of difference from heteronomy in art is subject to forces and constraints incompatible with a notion of the differential handing down of tradition. Tradition is not so much a place open to undetermined reconstitution as a place where cultural and social division is mediated and struggled through and against. The counter-hegemonic entry of the neo-avant-garde in the 1980s into the postmodern art institution, therefore, may advance a formal continuity with the original avant-garde, but it also enacts in significant sense a violation of those violations which are not amenable to aesthetic redemption or semiotic recoding: cultural and social division. In Foster and Andrew Benjamin the space of the avant-garde is essentially de-classed.

There are two things at stake in Adorno's understanding of the avant-garde, that make it (within limits) a more suitable candidate for a defence of the category of the avant-garde and the constitutive power of negation. First, by insisting on the mediation of cultural and social division as the ground of the production of art's difference out of the heteronomy of tradition, Adorno's theory of the avant-garde keeps faith with the 'violence' from below of the original avant-garde's rupture with the art institution: there can be no continuity with the original avant-garde that doesn't also recognise that the original avant-garde continues to expose the false totality of the neo-avant-garde; and secondly, by insisting on the necessary violations and self-violations involved in art's task of affirming the non-identitical, the question of art's formal continuity with the avant-garde is placed on a more solid subjective footing. That is, if the production of the 'new' is not to

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[108] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p33

be confused simplistically with fads and novelties this is because the 'new' is the place where the subject's irreconcilability is produced. By irreconciliability I mean the sense that the subject is, as Zizek suggests, always 'out of joint', or in discord, with the place in which it finds itself and consequently will continually produce aesthetic forms that invoke this. Adorno does not develop in any depth the temporality of the avant-garde as the temporality of the self-negating subject in *Aesthetic Theory*, but its significance for his theory makes its insistence all the more important for a workable theory of the avant-garde. We need, therefore, to return to Hegel and to Slavoj Zizek's reading of Hegel, in order to expand on this question.

In arguing that there is always an intractable or irreducible remainder in the subject, that makes the subject resists its full absorption into its social surroundings, we allow for the possible link between the temporal-spatial dismemberment of the subject and the violating and self-violating forces at work within the avant-garde's mediation of social and cultural division. Indeed, we might develop the open-model of the avant-garde one step further and say that the temporality of the avant-garde is another name for the irreducible infinity of the subject. By identifying the temporal experience of the subject as 'out of joint' with the experience of the artist as 'out of joint' within tradition, the agency of the 'new' in art is no more nor less than the mediating category of the subject's resistance. The avant-garde is, thus, not something imposed on an heterogeneous community of practioners, but is the space in which the immanent logics of the artist's and theorist's relationship to tradition and the social world is practised. That is, it is not a calendrical and typological set of forms, but a temporal logic of negation across and between different cultural formations; and this temporal logic of negation is now a global - if vastly uneven - reality: Western and non-Western modernisms intersect under the forces of globalization.[109] Yet, if contemporary

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[109] For discussion of the temporal logicof modernism (as against its arthistorical and typological conception), see Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, 2000

political theory allows us to think the avant-garde dialectically on these terms, most contemporary cultural theory has actually moved in the opposite direction. Indeed the possibility of the dialectical content of the avant-garde after avant-gard*ism* seems to have capsized recently amongst those who have practised some version of the open avant-garde, including Foster himself. Foster, has lost faith with his neo-avant-gardist model, reasoning that the critical function of art is either utterly marginal to the production of most art or an effect of the spectacularised academy.[110] In a way he has (unconsciously) positioned his work in the 'endist' space he was critical of earlier. Criticism as mourning now shapes his narration of the formation, rise and demise of the original avant-garde. This 'endism' has also affected the art historian TJ Clark, who is one of the few art historians to have based and sustained his critical practice and defence of modernism on an explicit theory of negation. In *Farewell to an Idea* (1999),[111] however, the idea of modernism and the avant-garde as living energies is suspended altogether, or at least deemed improbable. Similarly, another modernist and Hegelian, Fredric Jameson, in his extensive work on postmodernism, has also made no bones about contemporary art's subsumption under the reign of the commodity as image.[112] There is a great deal of disappointment, then, out there framed, on the one hand by an unnuanced theory of commodity fetishism, and the other by the formalization of negation. This is why TJ Clark's contribution to this debate is particularly frustrating. Clark's model of negation and modernism in *Farewell to an Idea*, is a powerful reminder of how modernism is not a compendium of styles but an open and contingent means of testing the symbols and forms of modernity. This would seem to give him the intellectual manoeuvrability to avoid anti-dialectical closure, yet he opts

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[110] Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, Verso 2002

[111] TJ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, 1999

[112] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, Verso 1998

for a suspension of the dialectic in the name of his own cherished, lost object of modernism: post-40s American modernist painting. These moves can be traced to the exhaustion of a second-generation Situationist problematic. Under late bourgeois culture, where the commodity has become image, art can only be practised as a set of dead language over and above living subjectivity.[113] This is not to say that Clark's Situationist model of the commodity derogates the possibility of art as such, but that in prizing the subjective authenticity of a particular kind of modernist practice, he hollows out a living subjectivity from the forms of contemporary art. In this light, what is striking about this writing and the work of the writers discussed above is its failure to reposition the complex interrelations between autonomy, negation, subjectivity and the 'everyday' within a new constellation of divisions inside and outside of the confines of the received history of the Western avant-garde, replicating the same historical problem of mourning that befell Bürger and others after 68 faced with the defeat of both the early avant-garde and the revolutionary upturn. Autonomy, negation, subjectivity, and the 'everyday' are either parcelled out and fetishized or provided with a merely contiguous relationship with each other, rather than subject to new politicized redescriptions. This absence is no less evident in those who have taken up a post-Situationist line, such as those writers associated with postmodernist post-colonial studies, who have tended to shuffle these categories around with abandon. There is much writing that fits this bill, but I want look briefly at one essay in particular, because of its symptomatic nature for my arguments and the fact that it refers directly to my own work. This is Nikos Paperstergiadis's reflections on the 'everyday' in *Third Text* , which in an attempt to 'save' theory for contemporary art not only produces a tendentious reading of my intervention concerning the place of theory in mid-90s art in Britain, but also produces a highly problematic view of the politics of theory in contemporary culture.[114]

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[113] For a recent version of this argument see, Anselm Jaffe, *Guy Debord*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, with a foreword by T.J.Clark, University of California Press, 1999. For an anecdotal discussion of these issues, see Andrew Hussy, *The Life and Death of Guy Debord*, Jonathan Cape, 2001

My intervention on behalf of certain aspects of the YbA in 'Mad for It!'[115] addressed a particular critical task. It was not an attack on theory but on the *undertheorization of the place of theory in the theorization of contemporary art and the contemporary art institution.* A very different matter altogether, as any attentive reading would have suggested. The article was grounded in a Rancièrian problematic: the relationship between power, knowledge and class within the academies of art and art history. Throughout the essay my focus is taken with the relations between forms of class dissidence in the new art (by way of the appropriation of popular modes of attention) and the bearing this might have on broader debates on cultural and social division, and, not on the YbA's connection to some hypothetical idea of 'cool', or to nationalistic hubris - which I roundly deflate at the end of the article. Hence the concept of the philistinism employed by myself (and with Dave Beech),[116] as a way of understanding some of the tendencies of mid-90s UK and US art, is not a counter or reactive critical position to an overtheorized domain of art (sic) but something far more ambitious and demanding, the mediating category for an ontological account of art and social division. This position on the philistine then is part of a wider, negative dialectical and anti-post-structuralist research project, which I have been engaged with over the last fifteen years. [117] Failing to address this, Paperstergiadis talks naively about theory as if Victor Burgin's 'politics of representation', postmodernist-post-colonialism and post-structuralism were not all embedded in

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[114] Nikos Paperstergiadis, 'Everything That Surrounds': Theories of the Everyday, Art and Politics', *Third Text* No.57 Winter 2001-02

[115] John Roberts,'Mad for It! Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art', *Third Text*, No 35, Summer 1996

[116] See Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, 2002

[117] See for example, John Roberts (ed) *Art Has No History! The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, Verso 1994, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, 1998, and 'Philosophizing the Everyday: The Philosophy of Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Studies', *Radical Philosophy*, Nov/Dec 1999

a reactionary account of epistemology, a reformist politics, and self-inflating account of intellectual work in the academy. In my view anything that challenges these things, including the delinquencies and dissidencies of art, is a significant contribution to emancipatory struggles. A commitment to 'theory', therefore must also be accompanied by the understanding that the production and dissemination of theory is embedded within bourgeois institutions of expertise. The important issue is always how theory *finds itself* in struggle and negation; and sometimes for art, this will involve the actual abandonment and desecration of would-be 'enlightened' positions, because these positions have become bound up official and customary modes of attention and thinking. In this art is compelled to continue to find its resources in all kinds of unpromising and unprepossessing quarters, in order to continually renegotiate its space of autonomy as a set of immersive, critical struggles. And this, precisely, is what the open-space of the avant-garde after avant-gard*ism* names and organizes culturally and politically: the 'endless' mediation of the irreconcilable subject. Although Nicolas Bourriaud doesn't have a theory of the avant-garde, or a theory of negation as such, (to his detriment), his work perhaps more than other contemporary cultural theorist comes closest to what I am arguing here. Dismissing the idea of late capitalism as the realm of dead subjectivity and self-enclosed image-production he argues that the models of art which conform to these theories, simply deliver subjectivity over to the ruling forms and interests. [118] This collusion continues to be perpetrated through treating contemporary art as a Cartesian model of stylistic invention parasitic on some fundamental loss of value and cultural habitus, and not as a divided productive/reproductive site, a place where value is constantly renewed, remade and reframed within, and against, capitalist spectacle. The necessity of art lies in its power to inhabit, transplant, decontextualize, and thereby produce a kind of *détourage*, in defiance of the mass sensorium.

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[118] See, Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique Relationnelle* , les presses du réel, (2001), and *Postproduction*: *Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Sternberg (2002)

"[C]ontrary to the received idea, we are not saturated with images, but subjected to the lack of certain images, which must be produced to fill in the blanks if the official image of community".[119] The expression of the principle maybe a bit clumsy but the sentiment is correct. There is no waiting on emancipation and meaning: "no sign must remain inert, no image must remain untouchable. Art represent a counter-power".[120] I am also reminded here of Rancière's reflections on bourgeois democracy. A community of equals can only achieve substantial form if it is tied to a continuous process of verification and reiteration, otherwise, it produces the opposite: the endless production of acquiescence in the name of equality and freedom.[121]

However, there are important ontological implications in defending an open avant-garde model that necessarily also take us beyond Bourriaud's theory of counter-power in art and Rancière's model of democracy. For by establishing the subject as fundamentally 'out of joint', the possibility of the 'new' as a break from within tradition is also opened up to the possibility of the *qualitatively* new, to the Event that doesn't just rework the already given, but emerges without precedent, to produce a rupture in the present: the Event which cannot be predicted with reference to pregiven circumstances and limits. One of the problems with the revisionist postmodernist version of the open-avant-garde model is that this qualitative break to the new within the 'new' as "anorginal difference" is repressed. In fact in revisionist postmodernism there is no past or futural Event that can possibly break through the present, because every Event falls back into a homogeneous, linear, schematized time. Revolutions are always being rewritten merely as interruptions. Accordingly what is absent from the revisionist postmodernist open-avant-garde model of "anoriginal difference" is

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[119] Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, op cit, p46

[120] Bourriaud, ibid, p87

[121] Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, Verso 1995,

that its understanding of art's emergence from heteronomy is unable to accommodate the possibility of an artistic act that is part of an Event that "tears the texture of reality apart"[122] without warning, and therefore breaks the preexisting symbolic network.

In these terms I want to advance a theory of the avant-garde in which the avant-garde as Event and temporal process interconnect. Or rather, I want to advance a theory in which the Event of the avant-garde imposes on the temporal avant-garde model not as the failed Event which enervates tradition and which the present simply accommodates, but the failed Event that produces a repressed potentiality in the present that stands to break open tradition. This does not mean, for example, that the failed and interruptive Event of the original avant-garde is about to return fully emergent. But, rather that to hold to the truth of the failure of the original avant-garde is to always hold on to the truth of its unfulfilled universal dimension which the untruth of capitalism holds in place. This why we need a theory of open theory of the avant-garde which identities the freedom of art with that which is not yet caught up in the web of necessity. A theory of the avant-garde which incorporates the repressed potential of the failed revolutionary Event *and* the 'irreconcilability' of the subject.

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[122] Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, op cit, p32

Chapter 3: Conceptual art and Imageless Truth

Conceptual art often assigned to texts the privilege that was previously enjoyed by pictures. It put texts where pictures used to be. For many critics this was seen as the final formal reduction of post-war modern art - the dissolution of the artefactual into art-as-idea. Indeed, there were some who thought that Conceptual art was the very terminus of art itself, the absolute negation of all that Western art has traditionally valued and sustained. This sense of iconoclasm is, however, misleading, not least because 'anti-visuality' has deeper roots in art's past than the anti-mimeticism of the 20th century avant-garde. A distrust of mimesis and sensible form shapes the very development of autonomous art in the modern period, defines it even. As autonomous art arises with Romanticism the tradition of scepticism regarding the truthfulness of appearance in post-Platonist philosophy is transfigured into a scepticism about mimesis and sensible form in art as such. There grows a convergence between the distrust of empirical appearances as a source of truth in art and the fact that the sensible appearance of art are not just illusory but alienated from a wider engaged and worshipful community. This is why Hegel is the key philosopher of art's post-Platonic Enlightenment. Like Kant, Hegel inherits the post-Platonist distrust of mimetic appearances and sensible form, but he brings to this an unprecedented, modern, historical consciousness.

For Hegel empirical reality is a 'crueller' illusion in its deceptive immediacy than the 'secondary' illusions of art. "Art liberates the real import of appearances from the semblance and deception of this bad and fleeting world and imparts to phenomenal semblances a higher reality born of mind".[123] Yet despite the intellectual importance, which Hegel assigns to art, it is not the "absolute mode of

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[123] G.W.F. Hegel, 'On Art', translated by Bernard Bosanquet, *On Art, Religion, and the History of Philosophy: Introductory Lectures*, (ed, J.Glenn Gray, intro. Tom Rockmore), Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1997, p31

bringing the mind's genuine interests into consciousness".[124] Only a certain kind of - restricted - truth is available to modern art. This is because the intellectual redemption of the sensuous art object is itself a reflection of art's modern alienation. Romanticism represents the progressive flourishing of intellect in art, but it also signals its increasing separation from the embodiment of spirit in community. In the absence of traditional religious communities in which artistic works might be venerated, thought and reflection have outstripped the work of art. This observation is the basis of Hegel's notorious notion of the 'end of art'. When Hegel says art's highest destiny is a thing of the past, he is arguing that its telos has been transformed into the domain of our ideas about art, losing its former collective basis in reality. In redeeming its sensuous appeal Romanticism is unable to make good modern art's Spiritual destiny. It therefore prepares the ground for its supersession by Thought itself. Accordingly, the forms of art, which come closest to this philosophical development of Spirit, are poetry and music for it is poetry and music, which are not reliant for their realisation on sensible appearance, but are able to launch themselves "exclusively in the inner space".[125] Works which rely on sound and language reduce that alienating distance between spectator and object which is occasioned by the artefactual character of visual art.

For Hegel, appearances lack intrinsic universality. Images may bear forth an intelligible aspect and carry spiritual content, but this only serves to demonstrate that the cognitive character of art has its origin outside the sensible realm. Although images present truths to the spectator, the form in which these truths are presented is inappropriate to the higher demands of Reason. The presentation of concepts by the means of images violates the infinite character of Reason. In this Hegel is close to Kant. Both acknowledge that sensible appearances are

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[124] G.W.F. Hegel, ibid, p32

[125] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, translated by T.M.Knox, Oxford University Press, 1975. p123

inadequate in the presentation of the infinite, but Hegel refuses to accept Kant's view that the infinite must therefore be unknowable, rather, the infinite is knowable in the medium of Thought itself. For Hegel Kant's principle of reflective unity only operates within the faculty of judgement, which is quasi-psychological. If a stronger concept of rationality is to be defended, the source of Reason and its infinite character is not to be located in the knowing transcendental subject at all, but in the absolute subject as part of an objective, unfolding world process or Spirit. Spirit is equivalent to the ex-post knowledge of things: subjects come to an understanding of their activities in the light of being interpreted, and are able thereby to adjust or transform their judgements and understanding accordingly.

Hegel's notion of the self-development of Thought is best seen as a process of imageless truth. Indeed, Thought is itself the production of imageless truth in the sense that imageless truth is the dialectical outcome of the movement of Spirit. Or rather, dialectic is imageless truth, as the movement of consciousness cannot be expressed in descriptive form or ordinary language; it can only be experienced in motion.[126] Hegel's rejection of sense-experience and understanding as the foundation of truth, lies, therefore, in a positive reversal of the picture-theory of consciousness. The inability to fix truth in a picture is not to be considered as a limitation, but as the purposive and active basis of understanding. Truth is temporal rather than spatial.

Hegel's temporal understanding of truth haunts Conceptual art. But unlike the critique of empiricism it doesn't haunt Conceptual art as a direct philosophical presence. Indeed in both Conceptual art as writing and in much writing about Conceptual art, Hegel's writing is largely ignored or rejected either as the source

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[126] For a discussion of Hegel's 'imageless truth' see, Michael Rosen, *Hegel's dialectic and its criticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1982. For a discussion of Hegel, dialectic and ex-post knowledge see Allen W.Wood, 'Hegel and Marxism', Frederick C.Beiser, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, Cambridge University Press 1993

of the aesthetics comedy of 'inner necessity' or (mistakenly) as one of Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's philosophic mentors. On the other hand, for those who argue wrongly that Conceptual art subsumes art under philosophy, Hegel provides the critical model.[127] Yet Hegel's thinking plays a large part in framing the historical tensions and conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, insofar as the questions art asks of itself in this period is informed by his understanding of Romanticism and the alienation of art. Hegel's distrust of sensible appearance on the grounds of the loss of art's spiritual satisfaction feeds into Conceptual art's critique of the commodity form and capitalist spectacle. This is, however, a Hegel who is mainly mediated by other writers, in particular Wittgenstein and Marx, and therefore a thinker whose ideas and themes remain embedded in contexts that have made it difficult to establish the specific influence and value of his writing on appearance and mimesis.

In this essay I want to look at some Hegelian themes and problems that arise from Conceptual art's critique of Modernism, empiricism and the pictorial. I shall claim Hegel's concept of 'imageless truth' to be the unifying content of a number of key Conceptual art practices, and the basis of their eventual crisis. My argument is that the concept of 'imageless truth' overdetermines Conceptual art's critique of Modernism, yet is implicated in its most interesting formal and cognitive challenges. It is deflationary as well as inflationary; emancipatory as well as constraining. If this seems suitably antinomic and Hegelian it is largely because Conceptual art is one the major moments where reflection on art's conditions of production is driven by a dialectical consciousness of art's possibilities and boundaries, of sensible appearance and truth, of image and language. Conceptual art is the first avant-garde art to bring philosophical consciousness in practice to modern art's performance of its own alienation. Yet

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[127] See, for example, Arthur C. Danto, 'The End of Art', *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia University, 1986.

this does not mean that Conceptual artists conscious of the problems of philosophy saw themselves as philosophers, or pretended to be philosophers, or were even in professional terms any good at philosophy. Rather, thinking with and through philosophy became the constitutive materials of theoretical work and daily conversation addressed to the crisis of Modernism. Philosophy, then, was not something that was brought to bear on art, but an analytical toolkit, which could be used - properly or improperly, seriously or insolently - in the gaps between art and its transformation. Far from working out what was pertinent in philosophy in order to construct a philosophy of art, artists' worked at philosophy in an Hegelian sense in order to find out what the relationship between various types of philosophy and art was and whether in fact some philosophy (the philosophy of language in particular) was useful for art and its criticism. The outcome was that philosophy in Conceptual art was a means of having different - and more exacting - kinds of conversations with those from whom the artist might learn and with those who might want to listen. And from this willing dialogue, a more demanding and expanded conversation was thought to be possible with those who wouldn't listen - those who possessed bourgeois intellectual and cultural authority and had no need of that kind of unsightly and troublesome theory. In this respect philosophy was not a discipline artists turned to in order to explicate Conceptual art, as if Conceptual art existed prior to artists use of philosophical categories. Rather the use of philosophy by (some) Conceptual artists was governed by the conversational requirements of learning in the face of perceived artistic problems and intractabilities. This dialogical ideal obviously does not cover all work that falls under the heading of Conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Joseph Kosuth's work for instance can be seen as leading philosophy in art back into an (expanded) Modernism, narrowing the open conversational conditions of practice; just as later Conceptual artists took Conceptual art to mean in simple historicist fashion, a philosophical break with aesthetics tout court. Yet, despite recent attempts to categorise Conceptual art as

culturally repressive, the dialogic aspirations of Conceptual art for a short while established the conditions of an open artistic community.

In addressing Conceptual art's critique of Modernism I want to look at the work of three artists in particular: Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth; and the group Art & Language. In this I will concentrate on those aspects of their practices, which bring conceptual's art's presentation of 'imageless truth' and a critique of the picture-theory of consciousness into focus. These aspects can be adumbrated as follows: the rejection of empirical, perspectival and expressive forms as the sole models of artistic truth; the privileging of textual and mathematical linearity over sensual spatiality; and broadly, the categorisation of the artwork and its interpretation as an unfolding discursive 'event'.

The notion of 'event' in Conceptual art is conventionally held to have emerged out of the 'democratisation' effected by the Minimalist installation in creating an interactive spectator. By directly incorporating the spectator's consciousness of their own body in their evaluation of the art object Minimalism's theatricality is judged to have brought about a double breakdown of the Modernist axioms that stress formal reticence on the part of the art object and naturalise the spectator as inviolate 'aesthete'. In enlivening and expanding the material and cognitive possibilities of the art object Minimalism renders these twin axioms of Modernism untenable. Minimalism's shift to the context of art's reception, to its institutional formation and perception, provides the space for reflection not just on the 'what' and the 'how' but importantly the where of art. It is into this 'gap' that Conceptual art is able to insert a more vigorous sense of the artist and spectator as makers of meaning, rather than as bearers of a formal tradition. This is because the spell of art's formal character is dissolved into the disparate functions of artistic activity itself. By this, I mean that the discursive development of art in this period goes hand in hand with the demand for a non-emotivist kind of spectator and therefore a new ethical and practical domain for thinking and

talking about art. The relationship between the spectator and artwork is treated not as a place of aesthetic communion but as a space of cognitive attentiveness. 'Imageless truth' in Conceptual art, then, is the discursive production and extension of the 'event', a movement of the consciousness of consciousness materialised in an inversion of the relations of privilege, which had existed, between looking and reading, picturing and talking. In this sense, the notion of 'event' in Conceptual art is qualitatively different from that in Modernism. Whereas Modernism is overwhelmingly concerned with the incommensurability between the contingent aesthetic object and our fugitive cognition of the world, Conceptual art is preoccupied with the unfolding, transitive possibilities of the materialization of art as set of formally open cognitive processes.

There are three distinct dialogical operations in the early period of Conceptual art: 1) as the basis for the formation of various ideal, imagined or actual communities of practioners and/or spectators; 2) as an exchange between the categories of philosophical discourse and the traditional and modern discourses of art; and 3) as means of analysing the propositional and referential conditions of language and art in order to say substantive things about art as a kind of discursive 'event'. The third operation is what is commonly meant by the 'linguistic turn' in the practices of Conceptual art: the reflexive incorporation of language into the visual field of art itself; art is conceived as entailing or being a form of reading - a diachronic process - and not as something 'coming before one's mind', in the anti-mentalist Hegelian/Wittgensteinian sense of the phrase. On this understanding we need to be clear, therefore, about the different dialogical voices of Conceptual art, which distinguish the different temporal forms, and critical inflections of Conceptual art's 'imageless truth'. For the notion of art as 'event' is complexly contested in the work of Weiner, Kosuth, Barry, Art & Language (and others) across these different dialogical orders.

Since the late sixties Lawrence Weiner has presented the propositional and referential functions of language as artistic materials. In the form of statements in artists' books and later as large graphic statements on external urban walls or in galleries, he has used language in order to divest art of what he sees as the inhibiting pregiven metaphoric functions of pictorial art and literary content in art. The requirement placed on the viewer to interpret a metaphor reproduces the conservative relationship between the artist as 'creator' of meaning and spectator as the passive recipient of its aesthetic truth. Weiner's refusal of metaphor is by extension a disinvestment of language-use of its 'transparent' interpretation. Through the insistent use of the past participle Weiner's short statements suspend the hierarchical imperative of interpretation, allowing the emphasis to be placed on the production of meaning as a productive activity between spectator and artist, and therefore on the metaphor-producing faculties of the spectator itself. 'A 2" Wide 1" Deep Trench Cut Across A Standard One Car Driveway' (from Statements, Louis Kellner Foundation/Seth Sieglaub, 1968).[128] Hence the past participle's active function: the apparent conclusiveness of each statement also takes on the form of a directive. Each statement functions elliptically as a description of a past action and as a suggested action. This enunciative voice is, therefore, participatory and futural, although of course, each statement is not given as a directive to be performed; the sense is of the described action being repeatable if and when it is feasible or necessary. Each statement, then, exemplifies and anticipates a dialogical ideal: the production of the meanings of art as an ideologically unencumbered passage from one self-directed, autonomous individual to another. From this perspective 'Weiner's' dialogic model is not reliant on, or attributable to, the personality, personal inclinations or ego of the artist; rather its purpose is appelative: to summon up and challenge the meaning-creating capabilities of its audiences. This disinclination to represent mimetically, therefore, is an open invitation to see art from a place outside its traditional

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[128] For a survey of the early works see, Dieter Schwarz, *Catalogué Raisonné: Lawrence Weiner, Books 1968-1989*, Verlag der Buchandlung Walter König Köln/Le Nouveau Musée, 1989

symbolic mediation of the 'other'. As Weiner says: "Something is not of value because it resembles something else".[129]

Weiner's rejection of reflectionist and expressionist models of representation defines the early moment of Conceptual art as a radical disenchantment with the temporal and spatial constraints of Modernism. Indeed, Weiner's linguistic respatialization of the art object contributes to the principal challenge of the dialogism of this period: the refusal of the separation of the faculties of reason and aesthetic judgement, enshrined in the post-Kantian demotion of the epistemological character of the artwork. For Kant aesthetic experience is different from theoretical understanding in that aesthetic appreciation of the artwork is not identifiable with any knowledge of the object but is the outcome of the aesthetic faculty coming into play as a result of the sensuous properties of the object.[130] The outcome is a focus on art's judgement, rather than on its understanding. This produces a harmonious closure within the act of perception itself, insofar as Kant is overwhelmingly concerned with bringing together the spontaneous synthesis of the sensuous in intuition - what Kant calls the Imagination - into the Understanding, or discursive reason. Inevitably the focus of post-Kantian notions of synthesis is the pursuit of aesthetic fitness and beauty as an ideology of happy reciprocity between art and the world. There is little recognition of - or rather a fear of - the perpetually unstable and disruptive processes of the Imagination's transcendental spontaneity and its perpetually unstable and disruptive effects on reason and art. Hegel, though, makes no distinction between the Imagination and Understanding. The Imagination continually tears the Understanding (judgement) apart, this is then subject to

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[129] Lawrence Weiner, 'Intervention' (1997), in *Lawrence Weiner*, Phaidon 1998, p134

[130] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by J.Harper, Harper 1968

resynthesis and further "dismemberment", and so on.[131] This is Hegel's ex-post knowledge of things as a drama of misrecognition, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other and instate yet another revised aim and action.[132] Understanding is not an impassive synthesis, but a process that is always subject to the disruptive activity of the Imagination. Thus, paradoxically, at the same time as Hegel fails to reincorporate art back into Understanding (philosophy) and identifies Romanticism with the 'end of art', he also opens art up historically to its discursive redescription. By placing art into the temporal space of history's drama of misrecognition, art's unfolding becomes intelligible in terms of the risk of positing and failing and positing again in order to risk further failure. For Weiner and Conceptual art then, Modernism's post-Kantian inflation of aesthetic experience as sensuous judgement, occludes this risk, by driving a wedge between the disruptive and unstable relations between language and looking, form and meaning.

Admittedly, the Hegel being put to use here is a different Hegel than the one usually identified with post-Kantianism (Schiller, Coleridge). The Hegel of post-Kantianism is very much the Hegel of reconciliation and not the 'open' Hegel of negation, of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[133] Indeed, it is not too difficult to condemn Hegel as the philosopher of closure. Art's disappearance into philosophy (reflective reason) leaves Hegel with a theory of art that is unable to account for artistic subjectivity. By arguing that consciousness can only develop via its relation to the development of Spirit, the expressive truth of a work of

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131 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*[1807], translated by A.V.Miller, foreward by J.N.Finlay, Oxford University Press 1977, p30

132 For a discussion of misrecognition and reason, see Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, 1996

133 For recent defences of the 'open' Hegel see, Rose, op cit, and Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, Verso, 1999. For a 'closed' reading of Hegel in relation to the critique of post-Kantianism, see Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Columbia University Press, 1984. In his later writings, published posthumously, his position, however, moved closer to a greater acceptance of the earlier 'open' Hegel.

visual art functions in subordinate relation to philosophy's Conceptual articulation of freedom. In this regard Hegel's Reason is the Reason of a fledgling capitalism and is yet to experience the full weight of the repressions of modernity. He does not acknowledge a contradiction at the level of artistic form between the Spirit's systematic subordination of aesthetic awareness embodied in a sensuous object and the progress of universal truth. In the Aesthetics he subsumes the particular in an accommodation with a teleological bourgeois rationalism and therefore fails to locate the question of the expressive truth of art within the question of the production of art: the philosophical redescription of art fails to return to the development of art itself. But if Hegel sacrifices art to philosophy (to Idea), his commitment to 'imageless truth' as a critique of the Kantian resolution of aesthetics in the judgement of beauty breaks up the synthesis of the sensuous manifold in perception for art. In this respect we need to make a distinction between the Hegel of post-Kantianism and post-Romanticism and the Hegel of the drama of misrecognition. Without this distinction, it is not clear why and on what basis Conceptual art uses the concept of 'imageless truth' to attack Modernism. What characterizes Conceptual art, then, is that it emphasizes one Hegel at the expense of another: it rejects the Hegel of post-Kantianism by reclaiming the Hegel of the critique of Kant's bifurcation of the Imagination and the Understanding. Hegel is used against himself, so to speak. Thus Conceptual art's critique of post-Kantian aesthetic ideology is as much about a critique of the 'closed' Hegel as it is about the elisions in Kant's concept of Understanding. And this is why the problem of metaphor in art is so important for Weiner. In post-Kantianism aesthetics becomes identifiable with the sublimation of reason and epistemology in the interests of an ideology of aesthetic sponanteneity. Apprehension of the sensuous content of the artwork 'stands in' for the loss reciprocity between humans and the world. By imputing to art the metaphoric power to reconcile sensuous experience and conceptual reason, art promises the restoration of the antinomies of consciousness and nature, subject and object. The result is that aesthetics is naturalised as a philosophical

idealism. In Modernism this naturalisation takes on a similar ideologically combative form, as a particular kind of historically ambitious abstract painting is identified with the very apogee of sensuous immediacy, although by the late 1950s this is largely depoliticized and uncoupled from its Romantic origins. By WWII the residual philosophical content of this painting had become harnessed to a powerful capitalist art administration. Minimalism, and then in turn, Conceptual art, were forced thereby to polemically resist and undermine this dissociation, as its desocializing logic became the official ideology of Western bourgeois culture. Consequently, what distinguishes the ontological expansion of the artwork's identity in the late 1960s is that epistemological content is returned to aesthetic categories as a way of holding fast to judgements other than spontaneous emotivist ones. The introduction of geometric division into the organisation of the visual field, the use of diagrams, tabulation and taxonomy as 'compositional' principles, the application and display of modal logic as a means of assessing theoretical learning, the incorporation of scientifically exact descripta and measurements of objects and events into an expanded understanding of representation, and the identification of language and non-sensible realia with the content of the artwork, produced a fundamental de-pictorialization of representation and consequently expanded both the virtual and actual spaces for art. The studio-as-retreat is exchanged for the studio-as-office and drop-in-centre, the museum for the library, the easel and foundry for the kitchen table, drawing board and photocopier.

This discursive reskilling or deaestheticization of art is usually taken to represent a radical extension of the Duchampian ready-made. The nomination, or quasi (appropriation), of language and non-sensible realia being an extension of Duchamp's principle to linguistic forms and to microscopic and implausibly large entities, like whole islands, cloud formations or fog banks. Although nomination or appropriation is falsely inflated by some as the cornerstone of Conceptual art, an expanded form of that notion was crucial in shifting artists out of one

(constrictive) place and into another (less constrictive) one, at a time when notions of artistic competence were repressively identified with the domesticated laws of 'expressive creativity'. Thus if the conservative price of nomination was, paradoxically, a return to the artist as possessive individual and beady eyed accumulator of primitive capital - "what is art is what artists say is art" - its progressive historical function was to dislocate judgements of art from matters of aesthetic taste. For it is through the gap between art and aesthetics, inscribed in the act of nomination, that Conceptual art is able to incorporate philosophy and critical theory into the relations which compose art's production. Hence, what distinguishes Conceptual art's discursivity is not that it systematises the nomination or appropriation of the ready-made as a mode of production. Such a systematization is no more than a positivistic version of Conceptual art: Conceptual art = concepts + appropriation and/or mechanical reproduction. Rather, the readymade is the means by which the relations of art's production are restored to their modern, interdisciplinarity and its objects to cognitive status. The readymade is the modal operator between, art and knowledge, art and other disciplines: between art and architecture, art and film, art and photography.

Robert Barry is an artist whose work bears upon and is borne upon by the expanded readymade and by the notion of diachronic spectatorship. In the late 1960s Barry explored the extensionality of the concept 'art' through an extended repetition of 'least events' or 'zero signifiers', in the form of books, or by nominating non-sensible entities (such as the inert gas Krypton) in the form of printed certifications or photographic 'evidence'. What drives the work is a gap between the compressed diurnal 'time' of the production of the art object and the vastly extended diachronic time - calendrical time in fact - of its reception. The form of the work clearly prevents any practically realisable cognition of its components and truth-value. Thus in *One Million Dots* (1968) and *One Billion Dots* (1971), dots are printed in tight lines on sheets of A-4 paper which are then bound into encyclopaedia-like volumes - in the case of *One Billion Dots* some

twenty five volumes. Counting one dot every second 24 hours a day it would take the viewer of *One Million Dots* approximately 115 days - an almost impossible and entirely worthless task. Indeed it is the utterly uneventful and unrewarding cognitive process - the complete absence of learning-outcomes - that gives these works the aspect of trauma. The liberation of art from the empirical into the unboundedness of imageless truth produces a horror vacui, the threat of a submission to an endless and uncontrollable profusion of the same. From these conditions Barry reduces mechanical reproduction to its most rigid, oppressive and bureauractic conditions: to a vast proliferation and unassimilable flow of information or 'noise'. This is a dark and unremitting view of imagelessness, a static imagelessness, in which the passage of time is without a significant event. In this way the loss of sensuousness, of the representable object, is not a summons to the 'critical-spectator' in the sense Weiner understands it. We are not asked to imagine the dots as symbolic mathematization of the cosmos for instance. Neither is it a zero-sum game of reductiveness in which the spectator marvels at the implausibility and audacity of the artist's use of exotic materials. Rather, by locking the viewer out of the traditional attributes of aesthetic sensuousness, the propositional demonstration of art as cognitively expandable category invites the spectator into a consciousness of the limits of consciousness. By expanding the cognitive realm of the artwork Barry requires the spectator to think his or her relation to the art object in terms of the limitations of individual knowledge and the historical limits of the time and physical existence of the artwork. His version of imageless truth is a brooding on being-towards-death, producing, in the period of early Conceptual art's drive for a 'new spectator', an uncharacteristic meeting between an analytic practice and sense of homelessness on a cosmological scale. This homelessness is particularly striking in the imaginary exhibition Barry staged at Art & Project in Amsterdam in 1969. Art & Project advertised that Barry would be exhibiting from the 17 December to the 31 December, but that the gallery would be closed for the duration of the show. Whether the artist actually exhibited in the closed space or not, the exhibition is

presented at the point of its inception as already a past event - a vacant space. Meaning has moved elsewhere. In this way Barry generates a conflict: by opening up the experience of the artwork to an expanded temporality, he at the same time empties this temporality of any specific dialogic content. In fact a disquieting reversal takes place: the greater the claims on the expanded material and cognitive field of art, the less is required of the spectator by way of engagement with the form of the work. Imageless truth becomes the completed dissolution of perception in the act of cognition.

Yet, Conceptual art's critique of Modernist positivity is not without its own troubles. The most obvious of these is the transformation of that critique into another form of positivity. This is a difficulty that disturbs the claims of much formally advanced art of the late 60s. The vertiginous sense of possibility and historical impatience of the period produces a premature fixing - or rather institutionalization - of 'conceptuality' as a response to the crisis of the Modernist object and spectator. The ideational 'coherence' of concept-art acquires the privilege of a must-get-to-category which establishes the conditions of historical precedent and novelty: coercive Modernist determinations are replaced by coercive conceptualist ones. This is the overwhelming problem with one of the early attempts to define Conceptual art, Joseph Kosuth's 'Art After Philosophy' (1969).[134] In an attack on what he calls the traditional morphologies of art, Kosuth seeks 'imagelessness' in the presentation of art as "Proposition".

Like Weiner, Barry and other Conceptual artists Kosuth takes the split between art and aesthetics in the theory of the readymade as the *raison d'être* of modern practice: following Duchamp the artist is free to nominate what he or she judges

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[134] Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', first published in *Studio International*, no.915 (October 1969), no.916 (November 1969), and no.917 (December 1969). Reprinted in Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed Gabriele Guercio, foreward by Jean-François Lyotard, MIT 1991

to be or wants to be art. But, in a move that seeks to outreach and displace hitherto previous defences of the readymade, he extends its logic to the presentation of - what, in the spirit of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* - he calls analytic propositions as art. The nominating powers of the artist are underwritten by, and incorporated into, its philosophical authorisation. Consequently he argues that with Conceptual art the ready-made is brought to philosophical self-consciousness: by nominating a particular proposition as art, the artwork becomes simultaneously a definition of art. For example *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [meaning]* (1967), one of a number of dictionary definitions photographically enlarged as graphics. Kosuth describes this process or relation not surprisingly as tautological: what the artist intends in conceptual form to define as art is art. But for Kosuth this process is not necessarily connected to any kind of visual form. The propositional function of the Conceptual art object is not bound by the traditional dictates of material visualisation. "Objects are conceptually irrelevant to the condition of art".[135]

Given Kosuth's attack on post-Romantic aesthetics this would appear to be uncontroversial. Yet, his anti-aestheticism does not entail a subsumption of art under the discursive interests of philosophy or politics, etc. Although he attacks the traditional morphologies of art and the dissociation of the faculties in Kantianism, he defends the autonomy of Conceptual art - that is, he defends it as a practice, which does not perform a service, or which represents a set of interests external to its own immanent problems of realisation. Paradoxically, then, Kosuth dissolves the function of material and sensuous characteristics of art, only to reinstate them for the purpose of defining art as qualitatively different from other disciplines. In this way the semantic reductiveness of Kosuth's model is caught on the horns of a dilemma: how is it possible to theorize away the sensible dimension of art by divorcing the propositional truth of the object from its material support, at the same time as covertly relying on this dimension to define

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[135] Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Art After Philosophy*, p26

art's autonomy?[136] This is possible for Kosuth because the logic of his work is in fact closer to Modernist protocols than 'Art After Philosophy' would want to recognise. For, Kosuth's use of the proposition as a ready-made is itself an aesthetic act, insofar as the propositional content is naturalized in the form of textual display. The advanced status of Conceptual art is derived from the visible incorporation of propositional contents into the field of art - and it is this process of making-visible that guarantees the art's rigour. Kosuth's use of propositional content is a self-definition of art for Conceptual art rather than a self-critical interrogation of art within Conceptual art. The "Proposition" is, in fact, radically sundered from its linguistic and sensible form, while being confused with it at the same time in a strange hypostasis. This is because Kosuth's primary interest is in stabilizing the linguistic turn of Conceptual art in the image of the Modernist self-definition of art and not in problematising the content of this self-definition.

The irony of Kosuth's practice then is that the expanded material and virtual character of Conceptual art is reduced to a model of semantics-plus-display and to a desocialised notion of artistic autonomy. Indeed, the model of imageless truth is harnessed to a neurotic defense of the purity of Conceptual art as a positivistic ideal: analytical propositions of art as art. In this way Kosuth's work represents a technical and graphic version of the epistemologicalization of the art object, producing a Conceptual art which is actually at odds with Conceptual art's broader discursive cultural dynamic. This places his work appararently left-field of Wiener and Barry - where no doubt he would be pleased to find himself. It also put him in grinding, rebarbative conflict with Art & Language.

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136 For a discussion of this question, see Peter Osborne, 'Conceptual art and/as Philosophy', eds. Jon Bird and Michael Newman, *Rewriting Conceptual art: Critical and Historical Approaches*, Reaktion Books, 1999

The original alliance that existed between Kosuth and Art & Language soon broke down when it became clear that Kosuth's Modernist containment of philosophy in art, conflicted with A & L's cultural encoding of philosophy as open-inquiry. Despite the disenchantments, which they shared in the late 1960s, by the early 1970s Kosuth and A & L were involved in two very different kinds of projects. This was because Art & Language's refused to bend their analysis of the propositions of art to the elaboration and pursuit of purified but given visual practice; rather, their analysis of the propositions of art becomes an analysis of the logical possibilities and entailments of language-use itself. This difference is fundamental, because it is the difference between seeing the categories of art as a transformable part of the dialectical process, and translating these categories into an ordinary propositional form: "art is...", as Kosuth does. Consequently, for Art & Language the emphasis is less on producing objects and of defining a look than on conversation, learning and writing.

On this score there is a powerful sense in which the model of imageless truth in Conceptual art achieves a heightened theoretical and dialogical self-consciousness in Art & Language's work of the period. Unlike Weiner, Barry and Kosuth, the discursivity of the 'art object' is dissolved for A & L into conversational activity, as if the stablization of art into any kind of iconic object would be the death of consciousness. In this way A & L transform the notion of art as 'event' into a first-order textual practice, breaking altogether with the residual perceptualism of so-called stylistic conceptualism and establishing a fundamental ambiguity about the artistic status of their textual production. By practicing art-as-theory- as conversational practice - the material form of the 'art object' is marginalized or disappears, or is owned up to as cheerful contingency. Accordingly, their categories and terms of explication and exemplification shift the discursivitiy of conceptual practice into an explicitly temporal or Hegelian mode. There is a core commitment to the notion that learning and conversation do not just involve transformations in logical space but actually entail the

transformation of logical space itself, recollecting Hegel's notion of the ex-post basis of knowledge. In other words, the production of meaning involves the transformation of the conditions under which the future production of the category 'art' is able to take place. This is generalised by A & L, variously, as a "dynamic transivity",[137] "a dialogical continuum" [138] and "transformational derestriction".[139] Conversation and learning become a ceaseless performance of dissatisfaction, qualification and self-questioning. "The problems we face just cannot be sloganised"; [140] "We still can't relax, we still don't relax".[141]

From this perspective A & L's analytical philosophic insistence on the examination of language as the basis for inquiring how we are in the world, and what we can claim about it, becomes allied to a collective practice of inquiry with regard to the discourses of art. Making sense of meaning (of intention, agency and reference) becomes constitutive in making sense of the 'how' and the 'why' of art as necessary to sustaining art as 'event' - what A & L refer to, following Wittgenstein, as the vicissitudes of 'going on'. The result is a qualitatively different understanding of art as cultural practice. The critique of the category 'art' does not begin from the idealist rejection of a conception of artistic practice as a 'whole' - the language of abstract postulates, utopian projections and moralising proscriptions - but immanently from the critique of antecedently given conditions of expression, reference and meaning. Artistic conversation is active and disputative, rather than ironic, supersessive or consensus building.[142] The

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[137] Art & Language, 'Why J.Kosuth Won't Work for Us & Other Trivia', *Art-Language*, vol 2 no.4, 1974, p52

[138] Art & Language, 'Slogan Adaptation', *Art-Language*, vol 3 no.2, 1975, p67

[139] Art & Language, 'Mr Yin Yutang Refers to "Fair Play"...', *Art-Language,* ibid, p68

[140] Art & Language, 'Instruction Index a x: Transcription 21.5.73', *Art-Language*, vol 2 no.4, 1974, p74

[141] Art & Language, ibid, p82

very practice of thinking about thinking about art becomes for A & L a means of attacking the positivization of art's social crisis in the traditions of social realism and Modernism, and by implication within Conceptual art itself - Kosuth's identification of the linguistic turn of Conceptual art as 'solution' to the historical split between art and aesthetics. By opposing conversation and learning to hypostatised 'crises' and their hypostatised 'solutions', cultural practice in A & L is constituted as strategic, positional and project-led. The outcome is a dialogical practice, which is fundamentally asymptotic: conversation and analysis rests on self-transformative activity, which is essentially open and non-predictive.

A & L were obviously not the only artists of the period to critique the de-ontologicalisation of art within social realism and Modernism in such a way. They were, however, the only ones to pursue this with unrelenting rigour from the left. In a reversal of traditional responses to political representation, political activity in art for A & L exists in the self-transformative nature of the social relations of artists. Productive social activity "is whatever assists the 'autonomy', solidarity and the self-activity of the class-for-itself"; [143] "Socialisation has to be compresent in the dialectical history of the practice"; and not as the hypothetical projection of political volunteering or populist notions of effectivity or accessibility.[144]

In this regard A & L's conjunction of two seemingly opposed traditions - Hegelian dialectic and the philosophy of language - was an attempt to produce a set of conditions that would allow a non-positivistic use of Marx to become culturally and politically available. In opposition to the conservative humanism and determinism of Marxism's orthodox allies, A & L set out to recover the

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[142] Irony, of course, finds a constitutive voice in A & L's later work. But if it is introduced as critical necessity it is also pursued with a sense of its inherent dangers.
[143] Art & Language, 'Mr Lin Yutang Refers to "Fair Play"...', *Art-Language*, vol 3 no.2, 1975, p74

[144] Art & Language, ibid, p68

realist-empirical implications of Marx's dialectical method. The artist as emoting and universal-expressive subject was exchanged for the artist as causal agent and contingent representing subject. But, in the early 1970s, the idea of a realist and non-positivistic Marx had little cultural or philosophical resonance.[145] Such was Marx's philosophical banalization in prevailing Stalinist, orthodox Trotskyist and Maoist circles, that the use of Marx's philosophical realism to address questions of culture, meaning and intentionality, was considered to be either opaque or elitist. But by stressing the need for an analysis of language as the basis for a critique of art's historical categories, A & L were able to reconstitute the analytic and negative side of the dialectic for art theory, devalued in the purely logical form of 'imageless truth' and in the crude teleologies of orthodox Marxism. In this their cultural critique of positivism regrounds Marx as the materialist logician and scientific critic of capitalism, and not just as the great humanist nay-sayer of alienation. Some muscle and sinew is returned to Marx as the critic of identity, and as such to Marxism as dialectical critique. In this sense A & L's principal interest in Marx is in his critique of Hegel's logic, for it is the Marxian critique of identity that enables the group to resist the bad infinity of a positivistic imageless truth - of Barry's infinitude so to speak. As we noted earlier, in Hegel the production of knowledge moves beyond the realm of dead motionless substance to living substance. Hegel rejects the traditional relational model of logic - S (subject) is P (predicate) - by relativizing the subject-predicate relation. If substance is understood to be self-development then the traditional attributive basis of the S-P relation exists in a fixed relationship of superiority and subordination. The subject is taken falsely to be a fixed point.[146] Marx likewise relativizes the S-P relation of traditional logic. But for Marx this relationality is itself inadequate. Marx's logic is based on an understanding of the relational

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[145] This changed with the publication of Roy Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science*, Leeds Books 1975, and Derek Sayer's *Marx's Method: Ideology, Science & Critique on 'Capital'*, Harvester Press 1979.

[146] G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, op cit.

development of the inner level (the essence) of processes. It is the contradictoriness of relations, that is their central property. By this Marx reveals the deeper relations of relations in terms of antitheses and contradictions immanently understood. Understanding substance as simply relational gives way to understanding its contradictory character within self-developing totalities. In this way Marx's conception of dialectic expresses a particular logical form: the intellectual reproduction of the inner arrangement or structure of the object in its origin, development, and decline. Hence, Marx's logical form unites the structural and the genetic.[147]

This relativization of traditional logic as the basis of a structural-genetic account of dialectic, is constitutive of A & L's theoretical project in the early 70s; and, as such, it forms the basis of their polemical attrition against Kosuth and the hypostatisations of the social realist and Modernist traditions. As former A & L member Philip Pilkington puts it: "The complexity of reference [in A & L's work of the time] is not mere logical form but is internally and externally historical".[148] In other words A & L's critique of the generic and identitary categories of art is historically specific to the critique of capitalism and therefore contains an implicit transcendental content. In this respect, combining the philosophy of language and Marx and Hegel to produce a homespun version of negative dialectic certainly had few intellectual precedents or guidelines amongst artists at the time. Indeed, the renowned inaccessibility of their work in this period is not simply ascribable to the difficulty of the philosophical texts, but to the marginalised character of the political and cultural settings in which these texts appear. For the cultural map of most artists was determined overwhelmingly by the fixed opposition of Modernism and social realism. Yet, to speak of A & L's intellectual marginality is

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147 For a discussion of Marx and logic see, Jindrich Zeleny, *The Logic of Marx,* Basil Blackwell, 1980

148 Philip Pilkington, 'Some Darwinian Conditions of the Art & Language Indexes', *Art-Language*, new series no.2 1997

somewhat misleading. For what was extraordinary about this moment was not so much to be found in the intellectual ambitions of A & L - who were the first generation of artists since the revolutionary avant-gardists of the 20s and 30s to produce sustained theoretical work - but in the manner in which they incorporated their intellectual labour on the conditions of sense and reference into the relations of production of art so as to make it part of a wider cultural tendency towards art-as-research. Their identification of art as 'event' with the 'thing-becoming-another' of theoretical practice is homologous with the counter-cultural notion of artistic self-activity as an anti-bureaucratic research programme. This is why the relations between learning and conversation as a collective enterprise are so crucial to identifying the 'other' side of imageless truth at this time: its social dynamics.

From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s radical collectives emerged within a number of artistic disciplines. To name but the most theoretically significant: Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre group, Jean-Luc Godard's Dziga-Vertov group and the French literary group Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or Oulipo. All were constituted in very different ways, with different aims and internal relations. Yet each was responding to the perceived crisis and loss of critical definition within their discipline at the time, which the demands of group activity were seen as being able to redress. For Grotowski this activity was held to strip away the actors' style and egotism in opposition to the spectacularity and decorativeness of the post-Brechtian Gesamtkuntswerk, or what he calls Rich Theatre.[149] For Godard it generates a working environment in which a political education has a collective impact on the practice of filmmaking in contrast to, and as a critique of, the depoliticised relations of production in Hollywood movies and the American avant-garde. For Oulipo it consists of the group development and performance of literary rules as creative constraints in the face of post-Surrealist expressionist theories of authorship: "An Oulipian author is a rat who himself builds the maze

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[149] Jerzy Grotowski, 'Towards A Poor Theatre', in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Methuen 1969

from which he sets out to escape".[150] The formation of the group's artistic identity, therefore, is inseparable from a political sense of the discipline of collective activity. Indeed, as Godard argues in 1970 that there is no point in conceiving and sustaining an artistic group or collective unless from a political perspective: "If you don't go on and organise on a political basis, you have nothing more than a free discussion. Then collective creation is really no more than collective eating in a restaurant".[151] While this is not a cut-and-dried definition of the function of the 'group' within the avant-garde (some avant-garde groups have existed in this political/self-disciplinary form others have not) it nevertheless presupposes a minimum condition for the artists' group: the politicisation of the relations of production of art (rather, that is, than the politicisation of art). In this sense the three groups above owe a good deal to the political avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s. But at the same time there is something historically specific about the relations of production that characterise this moment of artist group formation in the 60s and early 70s and that distinguish them from their precursors. Although these three groups share a number of the attributes of the classic avant-garde - rejection of immediate precedents; the clarification of formal decisions as ethical principles; the high-value placed on collaborative practice - they also exhibit a strong sense of the group as a kind of imaginary community defined against a hostile background of mass cultural alienation and anti-scientism - experiences that were only on the periphery of artists' consciousness in the 1920s and 30s. The political identity of

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[150] Jacques Roubaud, Introduction, 'The Oulipo and Combinatorial Art' [1991], *Oulipo Compendium* (compilers Harry Mathews & Alastair Brotchie), Atlas Press 1998. These constraints might include: N +7 (the replacement of each noun in a found text with the seventh following it in the dictionary), homoconsonantism (the retention of the sequence of consonants in a source text while all vowels are replaced) acronymic (a verse in which the letters of a given word supply the first of each word used in each line), tautogram (a text whose words begin with the same letter), rolling liponymy (a text in which once a word is used it can never be repeated). See the *Oulipo Compendium*.

[151] Jean-Luc Godard, 'Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group' [1970] by Kent E.Carroll, in ed. Royal S.Brown, *Focus on Godard*, Prentice-Hall, 1972, p51

these groups then, is defensive. The tropes of scientific research appear in the form of an ideal research community.

In a significant sense this period can be seen as the termination of the exoteric force of the political avant-garde tradition in the politically defensive group, despite the usual liberation rhetoric that surrounds the culture of the late 60s. Artistic self-definition becomes the focus for the freedom of self-imposed constraints as a prefigurative model of community. Or as one member of Oulipo, Jacques Roubaud, puts it, "the freedom of difficulty mastered". [152] A & L's work functions in this way as a defensive political formation - as a bulwark of learning-without-preconditions - against the managerial imperatives and reificatory functions of modernist culture.[153] From this perspective A & L politicise 'imageless truth' as the movement of consciousness and praxis. The critique of the privatisation of the imagination in Modernism and social realism is identified explicitly with theoretical training. But this means, of necessity, that cultural deprivatization is driven by the esoteric demands of theory. Hence the seemingly contradictory role of the dialogical within the group: the fact that the anti-positivistic, transformative model of artistic socialisation stretches both participant and reader to the limits of their endurance in its unrelenting negation of artistic 'common-sense'. Learning-without-preconceptions puts an impossible burden on group and interlocutor alike.

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[152] Jacques Roubaud, op cit, p41

[153] The group's anti-positivistic, transformative model of artistic socialisation should not be mapped mechanically onto a critique of Stalinist and Maoist bureaucracy, even if the political context of the group's early work derives from this oppositionalist space. The critique of a reified Modernism and social realism was born out of a process of 'betting and trying', rather than any attempt to model the activity of the group on an emancipatory political programme. The cultural effects of Stalinism and Maoism were seen by (the English section of A & L, at least) as the phenomenal forms of a wider and deeper privatisation of artistic practice.

In this way A & L's 'systematisation' of the asymptotic character of its practice in the form of a vast index of their conversations (*Index 001*, Documenta 5, 1972) is the point where the structural and genetic conditions of A & L's dialectic begins to reconstitute its criteria of operation. For, the Index is both the culmination of intense critical activity and the recognition of a looming problem: the diminishing use-value of the transformation of conversation into forms of symbol logic whose complex contents are irrecoverable conversationally. In short, the Index represents the point where the negations of Conceptual art (of the material object, the object as a work of a singular author, of the object's sensuousness and institutional value) are brought to the very limits of comprehensibility in the form of the work's presentation. By dissolving the distinction between artist and critic, producer and spectator, the Index's 'homeless' artist-as-thinker becomes overdetermined, occluding any stable function of communication and exchange between the work and its audience. The radical insufficiency of the Index renders the notion of art as 'event' and process theoretically coherent, but practically non-translatable. However, if this produces the threat of dialogic implosion for A & L, the threat of incoherence is also seen as the opportunity to reassert the sensuous and aesthetic at a dialectically 'higher' level. From 1973 the group reground the critique of aesthetics in a reapprehension of the object.

The Index has significant implications, then, for Conceptual art beyond the trajectory of A & L's own practice. The Index is not just a collocation of A & L conversations, disputes and ejecta, but in the image of Hegel, it is an accumulation of the contradictions and hiatuses of Conceptual art itself - a vast mulch-box of Conceptual art's internal history. The limits to surveyable meaning experienced by participants in the development of the archive not only focus the criteria of competence of the group's own recently acquired dialogical expertise, but also question the cognitive field of which their expertise is now a defining part: the collection of objects and texts known and celebrated as analytical

Conceptual art. In this respect, by 1972-73 analytical Conceptual art experiences its own crisis of form in the shadow of the crisis of Modernism, as the divagations of the Index pressure A & L to find ways of grounding their critique of crisis-positivity and sensuousness. The crisis builds as an internal questioning of the function of the image in Conceptual art generally as the photograph is incorporated into Conceptual art's expanded field of reference - a development which is echoed in A & L's own turn to the graphic image. In terms of A & L's practice the asymptotic logic of dialectical transformation had to externalise itself visually order to 'stabilise' meaning. Or in another register, the dominant iconophobia of the Hegelian dialectic, which A & L embraced more than most, is annulled by the Kantian moment of cognitive reflection in Marx's dialectic. The functions of sense-experience and conceptual understanding are refigured as mutually interrogatory.[154]

Conceptual art sought to define the production and reception of art in terms of 'event' and 'process'. In its pursuit of 'imageless truth' as the materialisation of the movement of consciousness of consciousness, the temporal and spatial conditions of meaning in art were radically destablised. Art lost its routine sense of place for producer and audience alike. All the dialogic models I have looked at, from Weiner's metaphor-producing spectator, Barry's spectator contemplating death and infinity, Kosuth's semanticist, to Art & Language's theoretical interlocutor, negotiate this dynamic through expanding the diachronic experience of art. That is, they all open out a space for the critique of interpretation as a form of spontaneous self-ascription, as codified in the post-Kantian Modernism of Greenberg. In this they recall Wittgenstein's rejection of the view that the difference between the person who understands and the person who doesn't is the difference between mental states.[155] Furthermore, as I have pointed out in the

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[154] For a discussion of the iconophobia/iconophiliac dialectic in relation to photography and Conceptual art, see my, 'Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual art', in John Roberts (ed), *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual art in Britain 1966-1976*, Camerawords, 1997

[155] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty/Über Gewissheit*, ed, G.E.M Anscombe and

discussion of A & L, this notion of understanding as dispositional achieves a high-level of political self-reflection in the form of the artists' group, in keeping with the wider radical cultural relations of the period. In this, Conceptual art transformed the post-Platonic (Hegelian) scepticism about the derivation of truth from sensible form, into a thoroughgoing derealisation of the myth of sensuous immediacy and 'visual language'. However, this was not simply an attack on visual culture as addicted to illusion, as if the diagrammatic and textual were the genuine and sole bearers of truth. By historicizing art as an epistemological and cognitive category, Conceptual art forced Modernism to question its aesthetic privileges, its temporal and spatial prioritisation of spontaneity and its fetishization of the singular author. The 'end of art'- Conceptual art debate, therefore, suffers from too much Hegelianizing or not enough, or rather not enough of the 'open' as opposed to the 'closed' Hegel. Indeed, irrespective of the individual views of particular Conceptual artists, the outcome of Conceptual art was not the dissolution of the autonomy of art into the truths of philosophy or politics. On the contrary its historical significance lies in the fact that in the mid-60s, aesthetic ideology overreached itself, disabling the interrelationality between reason and aesthetic judgement; and therefore limiting what might be thought about art and said to be art. That analytic Conceptual art, in particular Kosuth and Art & Language, pushed this negation to its absolute limit, is not the same as saying they identified their work with the 'end of art'. For as I have pointed out the opposite in fact applies: there is a homology between the critique of aesthetics and the aestheticisation (naturalisation) of art-as-idea in their work. A & L were quicker and more rigorous in recognizing this problem given the Marxian turn of their Hegelianized dialectic, and consequently built this problem of the aesthetic into their work beyond the lifespan of Conceptual art. It is nevertheless undeniable that Conceptual art inherited a post-Platonic (Hegelian) distrust of sensible appearance and used it as the basis of self-reflection on art's alienation.

G.H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M Anscombe, Blackwell 1969

In this Conceptual art embraced philosophical reflection on sensible form in order to produce a critique of aesthetic ideology and the alienated condition of art's autonomy. But, unlike in the 'closed' Hegel, Conceptual art attempted to integrate this reflection into a transformed praxis of art, and thus rigorously resisted a resolution of the antinomies between art and society in the 'imagination' or in aesthetics or philosophy. The best of Conceptual art connected art with both knowledge and ideology, as a critical movement in consciousness and in praxis.

Chapter 4: Art, Autonomy and Virtualization

What is strikingly evident since the 1980s, is how much writing on art and culture has been driven by issues of temporality and duration. It is as if the perceived accumulated crisis of the artwork's would-be loss of autonomy under late modernism and the loss of aesthetic experience that so many philosophers of culture have diagnosed in an early phase of modernism has entered a new phase of critical self-consciousness.

This loss has been mediated, largely, in two ways: through a 'conservative' return to aesthetics from within the privileged space of the museum, as a refocusing on the object as a site of contemplation; and the dissolution of art itself into a post-photographic telematics, in the wake of the digital revolution. The former is mostly associated with a philosophical critique of technology as the destroyer of aesthetic singularity - beauty, wonder and affectivity are unironic terms again - and the latter with a defence of technology as the democratic and multifunctional basis for an art without physical boundaries, an art beyond objecthood, beyond the 'primitive', stabilising, context-bound aesthetics of galleries and their surrogates. This sense of art's expansion into the electronic everyday certainly accounts for why, since the 1980s, there has been an exponential growth in utopian literature on the potentially sanguine effects of the new technology. The new technology appears to enact, in glorious full-colour interactivity the dream of instant portability, access and communal exchange that an early generation of modernist artists and technophiles could only imagine as science fiction.

This split between a defence of the artefactual integrity of the artwork and its potential dissolution into the technologically disseminated image is, of course, no stranger to debates on aesthetics and politics in the twentieth century. Benjamin's and Adorno's well-known exchange in the 1930s over the place of photographic technologies in art is the template of so much critical reflection on art and

technology since the 1960s. Yet, with the advent of a new phase of capitalist accumulation and technological development over the last thirty years, claims for both of these positions have intensified, and in key aspects, as a consequence, have also been transformed. This is due, in part, to what is taken to be the radical changes in the experience of 'lived time' through the impact of 'virtual time' put in place by the new telematic technologies.

In the 1920s and 1930s Benjamin and Henri Bergson were among the first writers to address the impact of modern forms of virtuality on consciousness and, as such, were among the first to explore the relations between memory and spatiality and consciousness. Both make clear 'lived time' is *always* 'virtual time', the time of contracted remembrance, of recollection. As Bergson asserts in *Duration and Simultaneity* (1923), the present and past are co-extensive, or, rather, mutually penetrate each other.[156] Hence we exist in the present, but live *in* the past, in the past or pasts of others. "We don't *have* memories, we *are* memories", as one writer on Bergson has put it succinctly.[157] But the anti-Cartesian phenomenology of 'lived time' as 'virtual time' has come to mean something more threatening, more intrusive, more totalizing over the last 30 years than Bergson envisaged. That is, under the vast expansion of the commodity form and the globalization of an image-based techno-culture, 'virtual time' is now viewed by many as having completely subsumed 'lived time'. The enormous technological extension of virtual time in the digital age - the culture of instant playback and the electronic archive, of computer generated interactive worlds and smart technology generally - has colonized everyday experience and collective memory in ways that Benjamin could barely imagine. And, this is why at the beginning of the modern origins of this process, Benjamin was so critical of Bergson in 'On Some Motifs

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[156] Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity*, *Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe*, edited and with an introduction by Robin Durie, Clinamen Press, 1999

[157] Sean Watson, 'The New Bergsonism: Discipline, subjectivity and freedom', *Radical Philosophy*, No 92 1997, p13

of Baudelaire',[158] for in Benjamin's view our experience of historical time - in short, the experience of industrialization and the daily effects of commodity exchange - at no point shape the content of Bergson's virtualization of 'lived' experience. Bergson's *durée* is inert and desocialized; or memory *without* industrialized, collective experience, as Benjamin might have put it.

But, if Benjamin saw forms of modern virtualization as having potentially progressive social effects, with the vast development of visual and production technologies since the 1950s, today we are also heirs to a large dystopian literature on technology. Indeed, since the 1980s, in response to the new digital phase of modern image-culture, the notion of virtualization-as-reification - an argument we are so familiar with from the Frankfurt School and the Situationists - has also been subject to a new and, even paranoid, critical language of constraint and dissolution. Whereas Benjamin used the word phantasmagoria to talk about the loss of experience which commodity exchange effected in its undermining of traditional forms of duration, writers such as Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson now talk about the narcotic and hallucinatory functions of the new image-culture and the disappearance of historical consciousness, the autonomous art object, and the self-reflecting subject altogether. In fact, what distinguishes this literature from its immediate forbears is its focus on the interface between virtualization and reification and the increased *speed* of certain sectors of production and consumption under digital culture. In order for the profits of large-scale production to be sustained overall, the extraction of surplus value has to be maintained not just by the speed of manufacture, but through the speed of acquisition and production of raw materials.[159]

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[158] Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', *Illuminations*, edited and with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, Fontana 1973

[159] This is why genetic engineering is currently such a major site of commercial and ideological conflict, because of its massive importance as a new source of value for the capitalist economy. Whereas it is generally difficult to speed up the reproduction of labour-power in order to increase the extraction of surplus value, plants and animals can

The diurnal effects of speed were certainly central to the reception of early modernist culture; train, plane, telegraph and telephone are indivisible from the modernist imaginary and its own paranoias. Today, however, particularly in the writings of the Heideggerian Virilio, and writers influenced by him such as The Critical Art Ensemble, the cultural effects of the speeding up of technology and the speeding up of surplus-value extraction have taken on a black aura and hypnagogic power. Virilio has coined the word "picnolepsy"[160] - the experience that 'nothing really has happened' for the subject, the human equivalent of gold-fish memory - to describe a modern psychosis of the 'now'; of the subject who lives their life and past in the rapidity, repetition and compulsions of consumption-time. This loss of a sense of historical connection is presumed by many writers within this tradition to be the defining experience of the late capitalist age, an 'epoch of the ego'. And what generates and perfects this epoch of the ego is the capacity of late capitalist techno-culture to reinforce the psychosis of the subject by increasingly binding its energy to more and more commodities (as inert things and images) and their speeded-up consumption. As fixed points in the immediate environment commodities produce an hallucinatory anticipation of control for the subject: the fantasy of the abolition of 'waiting-time'. As Theresa Brennan has argued, commodities deliver the fantasy of being *waited upon*, whether in the supermarket or in front of the TV.[161]

It is inevitable, then, that the subject will reproduce the hallucinogenic powers of late capitalism, because commodity exchange in the age of its electronic dissemination enforces and rewards instant gratification over deferred gratification, a difference which Freud saw as the difference between achieving

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be forced to mature faster and in greater variety shortening their breeding and cultivation cycles. This contributes to a lowering of production costs across sectors.

[160] Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Semiotext(e), 1991, p10

[161] Theresa Brennan, *History After Lacan*, Routledge, 1993

gratification through self-transformation in reality at a later point in time, and the narrow self-enclosing expenditure of immediate pleasure. Capitalism continually works to repress the moment of self-reflection in order for the reproduction of commodity relations to take place with maximum efficiency. From this perspective, it is no surprise that the ego and commodity exchange are mutually binding, and that "picnolepsy" becomes an alibi for experience. For the ego to survive it needs to dominate and control, and the most efficient means of achieving this is for it to see everything outside its boundaries as fragmented and without explicable order. The only thing the ego trusts is its own desires; consumption, therefore, blocks off truth through its reinforcement of the ego's survivalist wish 'not to know'.[162] To avoid disappearing in the movement of historical time it has to reduce everything to its own place, a place of 'self-defence'. Paul de Man called this, in a different register, the fundamental resistance to theory; Lacan, talking about the psychoanalytic encounter, called it the subject's resistance to its own historical rewriting.

In general, what these positions presuppose is the disappearance or contraction of memory as *self-reflection*, as if historical time never existed, a "perpetually repeated hijacking of the subject from any spatial-temporal context", as Virilio puts it.[163] Accordingly, it is this sense, or phantasy, of disappearance - of history, of duration, of the subject - which electronic virtualization is claimed to reinforce, deepening the 'disreality' effect of the ego's epoch. As a result the current debate on the virtualization of aesthetics and art, derives its *raison d'être* from what is perceived as the completed dematerialization of aesthetic experience itself. For what writers such as Virilio and Jameson, in particular, insist on, is the disappearance of a temporal order in which aesthetic evaluations can be generated and sustained by producers and spectators alike. But there is a crucial distinction

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[162] Theresa Brennan, *History After Lacan*, op cit .

[163] Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Semiotext(e), 1991

in their respective sense of loss which in turn underwrites the opposition between the conservative mourning for the aesthetic in contemporary philosophical aesthetics, and the transcendent *anti*-aestheticism of the telematicists. For Jameson virtualization finally removes the *justification* for aesthetic theory as a specialist discipline, opening up aesthetic attention to everyday perception as such. As he argues in the *The Cultural Turn* (1998):

[I]n a strict philosophical sense, [the] end of the modern must also spell the end of the aesthetic itself, or of aesthetics in general: for where the latter suffuses everything, where the sphere of culture expands to the point where everything becomes acculturated the traditional distinctiveness or 'specificity' of the aesthetic (and even of culture as such) is necessarily blurred or lost altogether.[164]

Whereas in Virilio the disappearance of traditional forms of aesthetic attention, and as a consequence the assimilation of art to the mere sending of information, is to the absolute "detriment of the object".[165]

But where does this face-off actually leave art? Despite their opposed views on the effects and outcome of virtualization, Jameson and Virilio share a powerfully diminished sense of art as a source of counter-value and source of cognitive interruption into the time and space of capitalist relations. This is because both authors see the image-as-commodity as a totalizing process under digital virtualization, and therefore are both equally sceptical about the power of the artistic image now to arrest or disrupt the logic of the commodity. Thus, although Jameson prefaces his view with a call for new forms of cultural production and modes of attention this call is strangely shapeless and affectless. Despite Jameson's refusal to get caught up in the anxiety of conservative disappointment

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[164] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern,* 1983-1998, Verso 1998, p111

[165] Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Semiotext(e), 1991, p101

in technology his model of virtualization is remarkable for the absence of any sense of social agency and internal differentiation. Indeed, what connects Jameson to Virilio and to other writers within the terms of the conventional technophobic/technophilic opposition is the disinvestment of modern art of its customary language of cultural intervention. This is a significant omission.

What largely defines and shapes modernism and the avant-garde in the twentieth century is the possible production and consumption of art as an act of interruption. Not just as an act of cognitive interruption within prevailing artistic conventions and institutional arrangements, but within the temporal and spatial orders of bourgeois culture itself: its modes of attention, its social rituals, its hierarchies of value. The extensive list of concepts and terms associated with this process is both startling and familiar: dematerialization, deconstruction, détournement, destruction, iconoclasm, deterritorialization, denial, effacement, adulteration, gaucherie, sabotage. We might call this the lexicon of negation that establishes the internal and external conditions of art's narration from Manet and Cézanne to Conceptual art and the Situationist International. For at least a 100 years modernist and avant-garde artists and critics took it for granted that there was some active connection between producing certain kinds of painting, sculpture, photography and film and transformations in social experience. Artists may not have expressed this relation in directly political terms - although many did - but nonetheless they saw the modernist imperative to reground perception in the disruptively unfamiliar as the demand for other ways of being and doing than compelled by the would-be rationality of capitalist relations. It is easy to call this utopian - and a number of artists did speak in the language of utopianism - but, in many respects, the critical claims of the work were far more contingent than this. That is, it was assumed by these artists that, be it a painting, a photograph or event, art could establish the promise of another kind of social experience, no matter how temporary and faltering, than that associated with the dominant bourgeois culture of representational transparency and instrumental utility.

Accordingly, the modes of attention of modernism and the avant-garde, their obsession with location, form and context, were driven by a strong sense of interruption into what might be termed the three defining ideological forms of bourgeois society: historicism (the reduction of history to linear causality or 'progress'), ocularism or mimeticism (the fetishization of representation as a window on truth), and humanism as a theory of the foundational self (the subject as a defensive ego, that we have already discussed). Now, this is not to say that artists took on these ideological formations programmatically, or even used such terms or their equivalents - although certain sections of the avant-garde, such as the Surrealists, the Situationists and Conceptual art made these terms their own philosophically. Rather, retroactively, we can now see clearly that the long formation of the modern in art was, and is, bound up with the negation of the temporalities of exchange value: its programmed chains of meaning, its amnesias and aporias. Indeed, remarkably, what defines the experience of much modern art is its attempt to *slow down*, or absent the "picnolepsy" of modern experience. For instance, Conceptual art's Hegelian reliance on imageless truth, and the Situationists use of the graffitied purloined media image, to cite the two most pertinent examples.

Today though, for Jameson and many would-be postmodern art theorists and telematicists, this narrative of interruption is claimed to be at an end. However, it is not at its end because vulgar historicism, ocularism and the foundational self are at an end, but rather because such claims to interruption and delay can no longer be defined, it is said, in opposition to the bourgeois institutions of art. In a culture where artworks find themselves at 'home' in the museum, that is, adrift from the social forces that shaped early modernism such strategies are now held to be no more than cosmetic or style options. Accordingly, the defining modernist belief that the artwork can wrest some qualitatively different sense of time from the "picnolepsy" of modern experience is actually belied by the incorporation of the modes of attention of mass culture into the contemporary work of art, and the

incorporation of those modes of attention into the museum as place of entertainment and populist explanation. Increasingly the museum is a place of technological interactivity and connectivity, a place where the multimedia installation sits 'peaceably' next to a Picasso and to a Matisse. From a broader perspective, then, this process of accommodation is taken to be part of a deeper assimilation of the forms of modern production and modes of attention of mass culture into art and the museum over the last forty years: the reliance on the prefabricated found object and mechanically reproduced series, and the erotic submission to the sublime in the form of cinematic and photographic spectacle. The twenty first century artist may remain, on the whole, economically marginal, but he or she is no longer *culturally* marginal. The contemporary artist no longer sees himself or herself as the unforgiving enemy of popular culture and its technologies and pleasures.

There is some truth in this picture. The classic forms of modernist distance from popular culture have been eroded. As such, art now defines its aesthetic 'otherness' not in competition with the technological everyday, but through it. But the key issue is: do these new forces and conditions, occlude art's interruptive powers and autonomy or relocate them? There is a world of difference between recognising art's incorporation into the digital everyday and the new plugged-in museum, and assuming that this process represents a qualitative break with the past of art itself. For if the assimilation of art into the technological everyday is not new, neither is the conflict between technology and aesthetic experience as a condition of art's modern self-reflexivity.

Since the 1860s art has internalized the technological conditions of modern experience as the basis of its modernity and resistance to this modernity. Consequently, the 'abbreviation' of time as a condition of art's modernity is not particular or peculiar to telematic culture, it is there *in* the work of modernism from modernism's very inception. It is visible in Manet's quickly mapped flat

colours, in Van Gogh's rapid, ferocious handling of painterly surface, in Impressionism's fast application of adjacent strokes in order to avoid the laborious process of drawing, colouring in and glazing, in Degas's photographic sources, in Duchamp's readymades and of course in photography generally. Paradoxically there is an impatience and nervousness in modernism which underscores its attempt to slow down the rush to spontaneous ascriptions of meaning, as if the undisguised demonstratation of labour time in the surface of the work - hours and days rather than weeks and months - was to be mimetically matched by the work's ideal spectator. In a strange inversion, evidence of the work's speed of execution was the means by which the attentiveness of the viewer was to be secured. But by dissolving aesthetics as a separate discipline of reading into the general perceptual field of the technological everyday, Jameson and Virilio weaken this materiality of making and looking, and as a result erase the drive-to-delay immanent to modern art practice. The continuity between art's struggle for autonomy out of the alienating conditions of modern technology and art's relation to the virtual technologies of today is dissolved. In short, the refusal of aesthetics legitimizes a whole number of partial or undialectical responses to virtualization, responses which have now become a kind of telematic doxa:

1) Because of the completed structural assimilation of art into the museum, the artist's bid for autonomy and the negative dialectic of the avant-garde are no longer functional.
2) Because the production of art is now widely incorporated into new forms of digital technology the artefactual character of art is no longer an aesthetic issue.
3) Because the digital technology provides unparalleled forms of image-delivery and image manipulation art is now identifiable *with* the electronic everyday.

From this basis, despite their different responses to virtualization, what unites Jameson, Virilio and the philosophers of aesthetics, is the fact that they all lose sight of the *work* of art, of the making of meaning as a process of discontinuity *in*

continuity across forms. Jameson and telematicists such as The Critical Art Ensemble do this through over stressing the issue of dematerialization,[166] Virilio and the philosophical aesthetes, by mourning for a lost aesthetic object (invariably early modernism) and dumping on virtualization. In this sense their responses fail to present an adequate account of the immanent problems of the artwork in relation to art's life in historical time. In emphasizing the disappearance of the traditional aesthetic object they lose sight of the fact that the contingent problems of art making are *always and already* inside technological relations, and therefore, the opposition between virtuality and materiality, as an opposition between a defence of critical consciousness and the loss of critical consciousness, is a false one. In this sense it could be said that Jameson dissolves art's autonomy *into* virtualization, whereas the philosophical aesthetes oppose autonomy *to* virtualization.

But either way the same outcome is established: the dilemma of modern artwork's continual renormalisation through its technological and cultural assimilation and repetition in the museum is treated as a *dilemma that art has to overcome*, and not a set of conditions which needs to be worked through as the basis of the risk of making art, looking at art and talking about art. In their separate ways both positions repress the moment of reflection in the production and reception of art as the continuous and discontinuous historical work of repetition, troping and recovery. In short, the art's complex and divided materiality is left stranded in a no-man's land between aesthetic nostalgia for the lost object and a vapid technological futurism.

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[166] Both the liberal and radical wing of the telematicist community - such as the CAE - dissolve blocked social change and the 'elitist' aesthetic object into a virtual community politics. Unlike the liberals, though, the CAE retain some notion of the uneven distribution of use-values and a critique of the state, retaining a link between the category of 'art' and the concept of interruption. As they argue in *The Electronic Disturbance*, Automedia, 1994, "the vocabulary of resistance must be expanded to include the means of electronic disturbance." (p24). This distances them from the Virilian-Jameson axis on questions of intervention, but places them squarely within the orbit of these two authors on the question of art's autonomy.

This leaves us, therefore, with a significant philosophical problem to address. How are we to think art's critical function and reception, in conditions, as Jameson and Virilio, rightly insist, where the forces of reification prevail? For it would be foolish, as I have acknowledged, to downplay these forces of reification. Firstly, I would stress the need to reverse the relations between subject and representation inscribed in Jameson's and Virilio's postmodernism. In Jameson and Virilio the subject is construed as free *within* the orders of representation and unfree with regard to its preconditions and outcomes. A materialist account of language and aesthetics, on the other hand, asserts that the subject is unfree within representation, and is 'free' - has critical agency - beyond its presuppositions and outcomes.[167] In other words, the opposition between the totalizing power of techno-culture and its degraded others, is transformed into an understanding of the subject as *in* power - as having the power of judgement and agency - and out of power - subject to forces not of its own making - simultaneously. Hence we may be inside a picnoleptic culture, but we are not all picnoleptic, or picnoleptic all the time, so to speak. Similarly, modernist claims about art's powers of interruption into the orders of bourgeois culture may have diminished, but this does not mean that they are foreclosed, for to imagine such a state of affairs is to imagine art without suffering and pain in a world of pain and suffering.

One way of looking at the relations between art and technology is to think of the challenge and pursuit of art's autonomy as a freedom immanent to the production of art under capitalism. That is, it is a freedom constantly rewon out of the *unfreedom* of the logic of exchange value. Because of the perpetual threat of art's loss of use-value under the tyranny of exchange value - the emptying out of art's aesthetic and critical singularity by the museum and market - art is continually

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[167] I owe this distinction to Gillian Rose. See *Mourning Becomes The Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

compelled by its own conditions of alienation to find aesthetic strategies which might resist or challenge this process of dissolution. Art's renewal of its autonomy, therefore, is *necessarily* dependent - under present conditions of production - on the conditions which constrain it. Consequently, 'autonomy' is the sign under which art is forced to labour repetitively on itself and its institutions if it is to sustain its independence - independence not from the social world, but *in* the social world - irrespective of the demands of passing political conjunctures and the forces of technological change. The end of the avant-garde, then, is a techno-postmodernist myth, insofar as art cannot but be attached to its own renewal in the hope of becoming the "future's past".[168]

Ironically some of the better telematic literature offers subsidiary support to my defence of a materialist semisosis here, specifically William J.Mitchell's recent work on virtuality. Although Mitchell's writing demonstrates a familiar telematicist undertheorization of cultural division and capital accumulation in its discussion of the new technology, the strength of his work lies in its resistance to the dominant historicism of our times, in which the 'new' transforms *all* previous history in its image - that enfeebled sense that the epoch we are living through is the time when everything ends and is begun again, and which under postmodernism has become the arrogant self-image of the age. Admittedly Mitchell is no Hegelian on this question. The sense of history as unfinished - as made and remade in the Hegelian sense as a drama of misrecognition - is largely a technical matter for Mitchell, not an ontological question, but nevertheless what he rightly defends is the notion that new technologies are to be used and experienced in terms of outcomes which are not predetermined in terms of their current exclusions and interconnections. For example, the new telecommunications may proliferate secondary and tertiary social relationships -

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[168] This is a phrase of Philip Fisher's. But I use it in a somewhat different way here. See *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*, Harvard 1991, p145

that is, indirect relationships - but this does not thereby mean that this prevents or diminishes direct social interaction or close readings of art objects. In fact, Mitchell persuasively claims the opposite: that the proliferation of indirect contacts actually creates an expanded need for face-to-face contact. In this, he argues, far from subsuming materiality under a universal and alienating virtualization the new digital sphere will generate "different balances of materiality and virtuality" in peoples lives.[169] This does not stop Mitchell, in a benign reversal of Virilio, from defending a crassly positivistic view of technological speed, in which rapidity of computer response produces a faster and more efficient flow of information, as if speed was the prerequisite of human emancipation. Yet his refusal to oppose materiality *to* virtuality - something, as I have explained, which Benjamin saw as central to critical and historical consciousness in modernity - has important aesthetic and epistemological consequences for the technological relations of art in the twenty first century. For in seeing the 'new virtuality' as an extension of technological forces already in place, he avoids the false arbitration of technophobes and technophiles.The result, for the purposes of my argument, is that living *in* and *with* the new forms virtuality, will provide the new testing ground for the new forms of art's autonomy.

An appropriate way of way of looking at the relations between art, autonomy and technology is to see them as a kind of "ceaseless comedy", to quote Gillian Rose.[170] By "ceaslessless comedy" Rose means that our aims and outcomes maybe in a constant state of mismatch, but in being so they provoke yet another revised aim and action, or the possibility of action. Thus the hubris of reason is comic rather than tragic, so to speak, insofar as it is always, "full of surprises, of unanticipated happenings, so that comprehension is always provisional and

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[169] William J.Mitchell, *E-topia*, MIT, 1999

[170] Gillian Rose, *Mourning*, op cit, p72

preliminary. This is the meaning of *Bildung*, of formation and education, which is intrinsic to the phenomenological process".[171] But, it is the avoidance or suppression of the unanticipated effects of the reason-as-comedy of the phenomenological process that dominates the work of Jameson and Virilio and the philosophical aesthetes. The result: a writing that consistently enforces a binary opposition between technophobia and technophilia.

In this sense we need a temporalization of art in the age of digital technology that does not oppose autonomy to technology, artefactuality to virtuality, the iterative to the interruptive, representation to the end-of-representation. And this is only possible by refusing to dissolve the moral and critical autonomy of the subject into, either, the unbounded aesthetic self, or into an unbounded technological community. We need, therefore, to refuse both the interminable mourning of postmodernism for the lost modernist object and the fantasies of unboundedness of the new technophiles, in order to proceed, as Rose says, through the fallible, comedic reason of the broken middle.

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[171] Rose, ibid, p72

Part 2: Photography and Form

Chapter 5: Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual art

Conceptual art continues to underwrite the art of the present, as if what it discovered about power and aesthetics is the unspoken challenge of all serious art. But this challenge, of course, has no uniform inheritance, just as Conceptual art itself has no stable set of positions. If Conceptual art lives on today it is not because of the transmittance of any orthodoxy, but through its aporias, mistakes and misrepresentations. This is why it continues to fascinate: for all its megalomaniacal and messianic tendencies it destabilised certain conventional expectations about making and talking about art which remain the shared cognitive ground of advanced art today. It is no surprise that twenty years after it imploded and reassembled itself as a diverse range of disaffirmative practices, it should currently be the object of so much critical attention and dispute. Since 1990 a wide range of publications and exhibitions have sought to historicise its challenges, bringing its intellectual allure into some kind of workable alignment with the problems of contemporary art. [172] That some of this writing and curatorship is either fuelled by nostalgia or by the business-as-usual packaging of the culture industry, does not alter the fact that the neuroses of Conceptual art continue to speak to us, and as such remain open to ideological contest.

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172 For example the exhibitions, 'l'art conceptuel, une perspective', ARC, Paris 1989, 'Reconsidering The object of Art: 1965-1975', Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 1995, organised by Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, 'You are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape', UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver 1993, organised by Nancy Shaw and William Wood. See also Josepth Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings,1966-1990,* MIT 1991, Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, Basil Blackwell 1991, Terry Atkinson, *The Indexing, The World War 1 Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism*, Circa publications, Corner House, Irish Museum of ModernArt, 1992, *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, Power publications, Sydney 1996, Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp,* MIT, 1996, Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55, Winter 1990, Michael Newman, 'Conceptual art from the 1960s to the 1990s: An unfinished project?, *Kunst & Museum Journal*, volume 7, number 1/2/3 1996, David Green, 'Between Object and Image', *Creative Camera*, Number 340, June/July 1996

What *was* Conceptual art has, therefore, become the major site of dispute of the new writing. This has brought all the old conflicts and wounds out into the open again as Conceptual art's leading disputants and supporters are given new vigorous identities or marked off as irrelevant or mere curiosities by the professional historians. Moreover, the disputants themselves have not been far behind the historians in wanting to derogate Conceptual art as mere curiosity or defend its founding ideals. In these terms, there are three discernible positions on Conceptual art: those who see it as a vast waste of time and energy, yet another example of sixties counter-cultural indulgence; those who want to defend some version of its founding critique; and those who want to pay tribute to the ambition of its mistakes; and put that tribute to to work in the reflexive spirit of Conceptual art itself. This latter position is what defines the tone and intellectual concerns of this essay and what carries forward any serious historical work on that which continues to arrest our attention from the past.[173] That is, it is easy to feel nostalgia for Conceptual art in a period where much of what it stood for politically has little life beyond academic art history. It is harder to treat it as something which might contain energies and insights that allow certain ideals to remain if not practically possible, then at least, intellectually defensible.

Beyond this melancholic work of redemption though there are immediate problems of interpretation. To pay tribute to the instructive mistakes of Conceptual art is at the same time is to open up the question of what such a tribute might actually mean. Or, in other words, if Conceptual art is worth defending in terms of its mistakes and aporias, then what is it that underlies such things in the first place? Hence the concern of this chapter: *photography*. With photography we arrive at one of the paradoxes of Conceptual art. Linguistic or analytic Conceptual art was largely an attack on the primacy of the visual, yet the

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[173] This essay was written for John Roberts, ed., *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual in Britain, 1966-1976*, Camerawords, in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name, at Camerawork, 1997.

majority of the forms which went under the heading of Conceptual art were photographic, just as analytic Conceptual art was mediated through photographic reproduction. This can be construed in one way as a failure of analytic conceptualism to make its claims tell, but in another way it reveals what many artists wanted out of Conceptual art's critique of Modernist orthodoxy: a new *reading* of the pictorial. That this was to carry analytic Conceptual art before it as well by 1975, points, I would argue, to the subfusc function of photography within Conceptual art. Photography was the means by which Conceptual art's exit from Modernist closure was made realisable as *practice*. Yet photography itself was of little interest to most Conceptual artists, producing a situation in which critical agency is given to the photographic image without photography becoming theoretically self-conscious as a medium. Photography, then, had an indirect function: it allowed Conceptual art to reconnect itself to the world of social appearances without endorsing a *pre*-Modernist defence of the pictorial.

But if the history of Conceptual art needs to be opened up to the disruptive presence of photography, this does not mean we have somehow explained Conceptual art or accounted for what made Conceptual art so damaging and exciting in the first place. For there is a tendency at the moment in the revisionist histories to use Conceptual art's relationship with photography as an excuse to 'tidy up' up Conceptual art in the interests of making it more palatable to administrators and critics. Thus in emphasizing photography at the expense of analytic Conceptual art, some writers have wanted to 'save' Conceptual art from what they take to be its descent into bureaucratic theoreticism, that is, 'save' it from Art & Language. The reduction of Art & Language's analytic conceptualism to a caricature of reified reason maybe a convenient way of attacking the theoretical prolixity of Conceptual art as a whole, but as empirical evidence about what made Art & Language's practice so compelling as a contribution to Conceptual art it is inadmissible. What also needs to be brought back into the historical frame is how humorous and sardonic much of their early

work was; and how this impulse is what distinguishes the place of theory within Conceptual art from Modernism. This is important because the perlocutionary force of much of their writing against the 'sins' of others was actually satirical. Consequently in opening up Conceptual art to the unconscious place of photography it is necessary to keep in mind that the dominant theoretical voice of Conceptual art was also, in a sense, not to be trusted, was not what it seemed to be. And to insert myself and my own intellectual formation into this history, this is what had the greatest appeal for me about Conceptual art reading *Art-Language* in the late seventies and early eighties. The mixture of theoretical exactitude and playfulness, political rectitude and irresponsibility, the language of the seminar and the pub, produced a highly toxic brew. Indeed, it was seductive to the point of wanting to be like that; for to be rude and rigorous, artist and philistine seemed the best of all possible worlds. Thus as analytical Conceptual art is rightly opened to criticism and the countervailing arguments of photography we need nevertheless to keep in mind what made Conceptual art's theoretical excursions so liberating: that seriousness and ambition in art might also be a form of delinquency and malingering.

In the late sixties Conceptual art gave Modernism a "nervous breakdown".[174] It did this by subjecting Modernism to a thorough-going epistemological and ontological demolition job. As if caught in the interrogative glare of both the psychoanalyst and detective, Modernism's claims to self-knowledge were shown to hide the aetologies of the repressive personality. Modernism's disinclination, or resistance, to examine what it understood as value and quality meant that the new art was continually forced to test its ambitions against what it perceived as arbitrary and authoritarian criteria. Consequently, the idea that incontestable quality in art was identifiable with certain kinds of 'optically vivid' abstract

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[174] Mel Ramsden, 'Ian Burn's excellent adventure', *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, op cit p23

painting and sculpture was judged to be based on prejudice rather than reason. Moreover, such justifications could be exposed non-cognitively as connected to vested art-market interests. As a result what Conceptual art set out to reclaim was the identity of the artist as a conceptual thinker, as someone whose judgement on art and culture was not to be governed by unexamined notions of 'good taste' and aesthetic sensitivity. This meant a very different sense of the modern *in* art than Modernism was prepared or able to imagine; that is, Conceptual art rejected Kantian self-criticism in favour of a reidentification of self-criticism with the negative critique of the avant-garde. Thus whereas Modernism could only conceive of aesthetic transformation in terms of the internal modification of a restrictive set of formal contents (abstract painting), Conceptual art questioned the very coherence and legitimacy of these contents. In these terms the critique of the language of art was brought to bear on Modernism as a critique of art's historical identity. This involved shifting the primary function of the artist as the producer of discrete objects to the producer of ideas about ideas; or rather, in order for the artist to feel historically confident about producing objects or events as art the artist had to become their own best critic and historian. Hence the emergence of Conceptual art in 1966 lies in the self-education of a generation of artists as a practical reassertion of the demands of artistic autonomy. It makes little sense to talk about Conceptual art as artists doing-theory-as-art, as if Conceptual art had the theory in place which they then designated as art. The theory took on a prominence because that is what artists necessarily had to do - fitfully, pathologically even - in order to clear away a workable space for practice.

In Britain and the USA in the late sixties the focus of this clearance was a philosophical enquiry into art's *conditions of possibility*. A number of artists began to use the tools and categories of analytical philosophy (and only later Marxism and Situationist theory) to detach art from presuppositions about what art *is*. This meant that there could be no talk of art but only 'art' insofar as the

activity of art making could not be derived from what was taken to *be* art at a given historical moment. Thus the intellectual and aesthetic work of art out of which the art object or event is made is logically and ontologically prior to any pregiven supposition about the essence and unity of art. This rejection of any a priori identity of the artwork is the shared problem of the writing of all the early British and American conceptualists: Michael Baldwin, Terry Atkinson, Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden, Dave Bainbridge, Harold Hurrell, Joseph Kosuth, Vic Burgin, John Stezaker. However, if the problem is shared the response to it is very different in a number of the writers; and importantly it is these initial differences that come to define the development, fissure and dissolution of Conceptual art. For the critique of artistic a priorism is merely the substratum upon which debates about art and capitalist culture, language and art, image and text, the retinal and anti-retinal, get fought out in conceptualism. It is the dispute over what this critique of a priorism entails, therefore, which forms the fundamental ideological split in Conceptual art between analytic conceptualism and so-called stylistic conceptualism.

I first want to look at three founding statements of analytical conceptualism, one by Joseph Kosuth, and two by Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, before they joined Art & Language.

One of the most notorious and quixotic statements of analytic Conceptual art is Kosuth's - now well known - 'Art After Philosophy', first published in 1969. As a contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics or cultural theory it is to say the least confused, but as a manifestation - and manifesto - of what analytic conceptualism demanded of art it is beautifully symptomatic. In a grandiose echo of Hegel's thesis about the necessary subsumption of modern art under philosophy Kosuth argues that since Duchamp art has failed to meet the exacting requirements of the truth of the ready-made: with Duchamp, art and aesthetics are finally seen to be different orders of experience, and therefore, art does not need

to identify itself with an aesthetic experience of the visual in order to be classified as art. With Duchamp art's focus of cognitive engagement changes from the morphological to the functional. The historical and teleological importance of Conceptual art, then, is that it makes visible and completes this process by dissolving art into the analysis of the concept 'art'. Thus whereas Hegel talked about the end of art as the beginning of art's philosophical identity as intellectually revealed truth, Kosuth talks about the end of aesthetics as the beginning of art's virtuality as art-idea about art-idea. As he says, "Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context - as art - they provide no information what-so-ever-about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art *is* art, which means, is a *definition* of art ".[175] In effect analytic Conceptual art works should be self-referring as art, for all other references (to the world of human desires and social relations) are extraneous to the truth of the enquiry. With this he concludes that the operations of art are similar to the procedures of logic, mathematics and science.

Beyond raising the seriousness of what artists do to the level of a 'research programme' it is not clear what this actually means practically. For faced with the internal contradictions of art as an abstract method of deduction about its own conditions of possibility, he is confronted with the immediate and ineradicable problem of how such propositional content is to be presented. He 'resolves' this by recognising the necessity of the production of ideas in visual form but not as an 'art experience'! His use of photostats in *One and Five Clocks*, for instance, (1965) is, he contends, merely a temporary home for the work's content. The photostat could "be thrown away and then re-made".[176] This allows him then to claim that the art remains separate from its actual form of presentation.

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[175] Joseph Kosuth, 'Art After Philosophy', *Art after Philosophy and After*, op cit p20

[176] Joseph Kosuth, ibid p31

This separation of art from aesthetics by intellectual fiat is expanded upon in the following year in 'Introductory Note to *Art-Language*'. Here though he is more explicit about what constitutes an adequate mode of presentation for analytic conceptualism: "Many artists working outside (deserts, forests, etc) are now bringing to the gallery and museum super blown-up colour photographs (paintings) or bags of grain, piles of earth and even in one instance a whole uprooted tree (sculpture). It muddles the art proposition into invisibility".[177] Or, in other words, work which incorporates bits of the world through the process of mechanical reproduction is pre-conceptual, a residuum of traditional forms of pictorialism, and therefore a subsumption of art (propositional content) under the judgements of aesthetics. In order to firm this up as a model of 'good practice' he makes the distinction between the 'why' artist who works with ideas and the 'how' artist who adopts a traditional craft base to production and identifies art solely with the morphological. Kosuth's model is different in certain respects to other analytic conceptualists, but this binary opposition between 'making' and 'thinking' is certainly something that marks the early period of Conceptual art, and as such defines the ideological boundaries of the debate on the possibilities of art. The power of 'thinking' is what distinguishes the 'good' (historically iconoclastic) from the 'bad' (historically unreflective).

Whilst Kosuth was finding good ways in New York of distinguishing 'how' from 'why' the journal *Art-Language* in England was pursuing a similar process of philosophical adjustment, or "radical surgery". [178] Before Art & Language emerged as a coherent group out of the collective organization of the journal, *Art-Language* became the intellectual home for the new writing on analytic conceptualism. Two artists and later members of the group, Ian Burn and Mel

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[177] Joseph Kosuth, 'Introductory Note to *Art-Language* by the American Editor', *Art after Philosophy and After*, op cit p39

[178] Joseph Kosuth, '1975', *Art after Philosophy and After*, ibid, p135

Ramsden (Ramsden is still a member) who, like Kosuth, were, sympathetic to the journal set up The Society for Theoretical Art in New York. In a number of co-authored papers they address themselves to a similar set of questions to that of Kosuth. I want to look at two papers in particular, 'Stating and Nominating' (1970)[179] and 'The Grammarian' (1970)[180] . As with Kosuth they are indicative of what was being brought to bear on the visual, photography and Modernism during this period.

In 'Stating and Nominating' we are presented with a comparable split between work which acts on and analyzes the propositions of art, and art which reworks a received propositional content. Burn and Ramsden refer to this distinction as between art which *states* and art which *nominates*. Analytic conceptualism is art which reveals the propositional content of the work as a requirement of its making, and stylistic conceptualism simply points to things in the world as worthy of aesthetic legitimation. In contrast to analytic conceptualism stylistic conceptualism has been concerned with expanding an "observable range of non-propositional qualities without being required to provide any conceptual account of this art-work's *stated* nature". In this regard conventional practices are the result of acting without knowing what the elements or grammar of the language being employed signify, practice is 'blind' to its own determinates. Thus like Kosuth, in distinguishing analytic conceptualism from the mere nomination of things in the world, Burn and Ramsden argue that the content of the work must be stated linguistically. However, unlike Kosuth, this remains *syntactical* rather than semantic. That is, it is the linguistic content embedded in the internal relationship between signs which forms the analytic content and not the externalized linguistic demonstration of that content (as in Kosuth's *One and Five Clocks*). This

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[179] Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, 'Stating and Nominating', inpublished paper, The Society for Theoretical Art, New York, 1970

[180] Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, 'The Grammarian', unpaginated pamphlet, The Society for Theoretical Art, New York, 1970

obviously introduces a somewhat different understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and art. Whereas Kosuth sees his art-as-propositional content as lying beyond reference to any aesthetic precedents, Burn and Ramsden see their analytical conceptualism as consistent with the intentions of the best of abstract art: as in Modernism, advanced art must make transparent to the spectator its own rules of operation. However, if this locates their analytic conceptualism in an actual formal tradition, distinct from Kosuth's ahistoricism, this does not mean Burn and Ramsden are any more favourable to the morphological bias of Modernism. Like Kosuth they see analytic conceptualism as authoring a radical enquiry into the formal boundaries of art. As they declare in 'The Grammarian', because an artwork may need not be a denoted physical object, "the object simply becomes "less self-important". Hence the inquiring framework of proposition-based art should be linked to making moves from *of* questions to *for* questions (the securing of functional premises)".

This move from *is* to *why* derives its content initially from two related sources: linguistic philosophy's emphasis on matters of truth as matters of sense and context, and minimalist sculpture's recognition of the importance of context as a means of 'seeing' the artwork. In this regard 'The Grammarian' points to one of the key ethical and cognitive demands of analytic conceptualism in its attack on the morphological and visual: the production of new conditions of dialogue between artists and their audience, or as Burn and Ramsden put it, "new spectator requirements". It is easy to idealise this politically, particularly when the move from *is* to *why* does not in itself entail any commitment to analyzing matters of sense as matters of ideology, just as it is easy to forget how indifferent Kosuth was to anything but an audience of learned artists. Yet it was these "new spectator requirements" that provide analytic Conceptual art with its self-esteem and binds it to the future. Thus the whole point of shifting attention away from art-as-nomination to art-as-stating was to release the spectator from what was seen as the 'sleep' of Modernist spectatorship. To think about the artwork in terms of the

premises that govern its propositional content is to rewaken the viewer as intellectually attentive. Consequently, it was not just Modernism's aesthete which was the target here, but stylistic conceptualism's would-be creatively imaginative spectator, the spectator as free-associating libertarian. The liberal mantra of "make of it what you will" was not something that analytic Conceptual art felt provided any stable conditions for self-emancipation.

The production of the ideal spectator as reader and intellectual interlocutor and critic is eventually what brings Burn and Ramsden into Art & Language in 1970, and which sustains Art & Language's later understanding of the social implications of analytic Conceptual art. However, analytic Conceptual art's ideal spectator, in either its 'pure' or 'active' forms, brings with it certain costs. And it's these costs as they bear on the position of photography that I now want to discuss.

Despite Kosuth's early writing, analytic Conceptual art was not a rejection of the visual as such (philosophically defeasible anyway), but a rejection of its unthinking historicization as 'truth', 'pleasure' and 'beauty'. Modernism, therefore, was viewed as an historical blockage of the multivalent functions, applications and uses of the 'visual'. But nevertheless, this does not answer the very real sense of disembodiedness which analytic conceptualism brought to bear on thinking about the visual. In the bid to extract artist and spectator from the sleep (and charms) of the aesthete it set cognition against bodily needs and desires. Separating 'stating' from 'nominating', 'why' from 'how', it turned sensual appearance into an enemy of knowledge. However, this is not an argument about how 'thinking' suppresses 'feelings' or how 'concepts' suppress bodily pleasure. Analytic conceptualism rightly demolished the positivistic philosophic basis of these oppositions. But an acknowledgement that analytic conceptualism's - shall we say - distrust of the 'visual' was part of a deeper philosophical and cultural dialectic that went largely unrecognised by its

participants: the conflict between iconophobia and iconophilia. Iconophobia, or the fear of images, and iconophilia, of the love of images, ground Western's philosophy's approach to epistemology. That is, images are either perceived as deceitful and leading to the promotion of untruth, or they are held to provide a truthful connection to an object or state of affairs. In matters of philosophy it can be argued with some justification that analytic conceptualism held images to be deceiving, and as such aligned itself with the anti-empiricism of modern linguistic philosophers such as W.V.O. Quine, Nelson Goodman and Wittgenstein - the "heyday of meanings" to quote Ian Hacking.[181] Wittgenstein's concern with *how* language describes, and his later anti-mentalist philosophy, undoubtedly underwrites Conceptual art's rethinking of perception and meaning, although the *Philosophical Investigations* themselves were not available in English until 1974. [182] Wittgenstein like Marx is treated as part of the intellectual foundations of Conceptual art's programme. But if the connection between Conceptual art and Wittgenstein is much cited, as if the philosopher was a Conceptual artist avant la lettre, the iconophobic implications of his philosophy are rarely discussed in detail.

Wittgenstein was important for early Conceptual art because of one thing: his unswerving rejection of the notion that meaning is equivalent to something coming unbidden before one's mind. For Wittgenstein this mentalist theory of meaning is defeasible precisely because it puts a sensation of understanding before an awareness of a sign's use. Recognising a picture of a washing machine does not dictate an understanding of what a washing machine might be used for. Thus, understanding a sign is to have an ability to understand, to be a master of a technique, to possess a skill, and not a spontaneous process in which a image of a thing can be called on to give meaning to that thing. Abilities of comprehension

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[181] Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*, Cambridge University Press 1975

[182] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, 1974

are not interior, hidden performances. Moreover - and this is characteristic of Wittgenstein's philosophical naturalism - understanding as a matter of rule-following and the application of concepts is not a conscious intellectual process. What Wittgenstein calls 'seeing-as' (comprehension) is involuntary; understanding is coterminous *with* 'seeing-as'. In Wittgenstein then, the 'moment of spontaneity' could be said to shift from the production of meaning to its application.

This, by now familiar argument, was obviously a powerful theory to attack the occultist and magical theories of spectatorship and meaning in Modernism. For what Wittgenstein's anti-mentalist account of meaning demonstrated was the essential temporal nature of understanding, that is, a sign only comes to 'speak' once it has been subject to a process of use through time. The act of understanding may be spontaneous but the process is not. This very simple - and now philosophically commonplace - point had enormous ramifications for art in the late sixties and early seventies, because it allowed artists to theorize "new spectator requirements" in ways that divested judgements of the 'visual' from the requirements of aesthetic immediacy. Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's Modernism is largely inherited from an Enlightenment account of the separate and autonomous characteristics of the arts, in particular those arguments used by Gotthold Lessing in the *Laocoon* (1776)[183] to distinguish painting from literature. Lessing argues that literature is an essentially temporal art, whereas painting is a spatial art. The reading of literature occurs in time; the apprehension of painting is instantaneous. The visual arts are confined to corporeal beauty, and spiritual significance is confined to literature. Although this is not a hard and fast

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[183] Gotthold Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969. For a wide ranging discussion of this essay in relation to iconophobia and the iconophobic tradition, see W.J.T Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text. Ideology*, University of Chicago 1986. In conclusion to his book Mitchell asks a question that could be quite easily brought to bear on Conceptual art: " How can the rhetoric of iconoclasm serve as an instrument of cultural criticism without becoming a rhetoric of exaggerated alienation that imitates the intellectual despotism it most despises" (p204)

distinction for Lessing - he talks about certain kinds of painting representing temporal action indirectly - the distinction does hold as a matter of what is essential to painting and literature. Thus painting may allude to the temporal but it is not it is not its proper realm because it is not up to the task. Hence the would-be literariness of painting, for Lessing, offends natural law, producing a kind of monstrousness and arbitrariness. For Lessing the worst kind of painting is that which is allegorical. These "speaking picture(s)" are a mere "arbitrary method of writing".[184] In short they are forced. Thus whereas Modernism sought to shore up Lessing's space-time differentiation of the arts, Conceptual art was intent on breaking it down. Indeed Conceptual art's turn to the extended presentation of non-painterly forms severely tested the idea that the visual was anything but spatial. The identification of art's spectatorship with reading, the incorporation into the cognitive space of art the expanded time of serial photography, and as such the self-conscious expansion of the experience of art into interactivity-through-time, are evidence of a radical new temporality. In effect, the demands of linear and non-linear scanning, retrodiction, memory and physical interactivity produce a spectator who is never at rest, who is always being called to account for things in terms of what they do or do not know, where they are standing and where they have just been standing, like and unlike.

If this obliteration of the distinction between looking and 'reading', knowing and feeling, produces an alertness in the spectator not seen since the avant-garde of the 1920s, it also brings with it an enormous amount of unconscious intellectual baggage. For the historical irony of Conceptual art's attack on spatiality in the name of temporality and textuality is that Lessing himself favoured literature above painting on strict iconophobic grounds. Whatever painting might make of itself formally, its sensuality was potentially deceiving. The sensual rendering of bodies in motion in painting always had the power to inflame the imagination, and distract it from art's spiritual quest. Translated into the politics of the

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[184] Lessing, Laocoon, op cit, pX

spectacle of the late sixties the distrust of the visual in analytic conceptualism introduces a similar radical or even revolutionary iconoclasm. The cognitively attuned spectator and critical collaborator of Conceptual art judges Modernism (and pictorial art) to bring about a degeneration of weakening of critical self-awareness. The spectator is seduced by forms that are not in the interests of his or her autonomy as a thinking and acting subject.

It is no surprise therefore, that Wittgenstein's own prejudices against the 'visual' should fill-out the iconophobic-iconophiliac dialectic during this period. For Wittgenstein's anti-mentalist subject is the perfect candidate for analytical conceptualism's ideal spectator: the spectator undistracted by the potential illusions of images. This is to say that Wittgenstein's anti-mentalist account of meaning in the use of ordinary language enabled the processes involved in perception to be given a basis in conceptual description rather than 'mere' sensual identification. Yet it is problematic to think that processes of identification do not play a determinate part in the reconstruction of meaning. For instance on occasions the perception of an object coming before one's mind can play an important role when the subject draws on his or her powers of reasoning.[185] When someone mentions BSE for instance, I might think of the image of a Fresian cow. Clearly the image won't help me in understanding BSE or even the biology of Fresian cows, but it might prompt me to think of various physiological factors that might then stir my stored knowledge on the subject. But because Wittgenstein's anti-mentalism treats any image coming before the mind as a sign (as mere interpretation), there is little space in his philosophy of perception for mental images as relays to understanding. Thus although it is axiomatic that being able to point to or recognise something is not sufficient for understanding to take place, perceptual experience acts as input to the subject as a concept-applying entity. As such the important point is that our powers of recognition (of

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[185] For a discussion of Wittgenstein and anti-mentalism see Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, Basil Blackwell 1984

nomination) occur within the context of a range of concept-applying abilities, and therefore is a necessary part of a complex-range of meaning-producing skills. As Gareth Evans has argued in *The Varieties of Reference* , in relation to the issue of knowledge by acquaintance: "when the subject wishes to make absolutely sure that his judgement is correct he gazes again *at the world...* he does not in any sense gaze at, or concentrate upon, his internal state. His internal state cannot in any sense becomes an *object* to him."[186] The powers of recognition then may be fallible outside of understanding use, but the retrieval of perceptual information functions as a constitutive part of our conceptual abilities.

The reason I mention this is that the idea of knowledge through perceptual acquaintance is what haunts the debate on the visual in Conceptual art, despite the construction of an ideal spectator trained to resist the lures of empiricism. Thus all the moves made through photography against analytical conceptualism endorse some account of pictures as providing a means of connecting the spectator's cognitive skills to the naturalistic world of appearances, rather than simply to the philosophical categories of art. And it is this sense of photography as bringing art into reacquaintance with the physical world that defines the work of those who see Conceptual art as an opportunity to re-theorize art as a social practice. By this I mean that photography brought back from the critique of artistic a priorism a different set of expectations on knowledge and pleasure than analytic conceptualism. In a crucial way it reconnected art to the 'ordinary' and 'everyday'.

In 1966-67 there was no discourse on photography to speak of in avant-garde art. What discussion on photography there was in the culture remained confined to the professional institutions who were still fighting for photography to be recognised as an art in itself. John Szarkowski's tenure as the head of the

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[186] Gareth Evans, edited by John McDowell, *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford University Press 1983 p227

Museum of Modern Art's photography department during the late sixties was driven by the need to displace the functionality of photography and create a great canon of American and European art-photographers.This Modernist aggrandisement of photography was, however, of no or little interest to avant-garde artists using photography during this period. Indeed the majority of artists (in the USA and Britain) had no knowledge of the history of photography. What they were interested in was the very fact that photography was commonplace, as much at home with the amateur as the professional and therefore something that fitted quite readily into Conceptual art's anti-aesthetic and disaffirmative ethos. Thus in Ed Ruscha's photographs for example - considered to be a precursor of conceptual photographic activity - there is both an expulsion of the photojournalist's 'significant moment' through the repetition of everyday objects and an indifference to qualities of presentation subscribed to by the fine art professional. The effect is to create a form of attention which is as 'ordinary' or unassuming as looking at a family album or in an estate agent's window. This 'anti-professional' use of photography clearly feeds into early conceptualism's rejection of fine-art pictorialism. For what was of concern for artists such as Bruce Nauman, Robert Barry, and Douglas Huebler in the late sixties was for the use of photography to be distinguished from its location within the history of photography. In this the fundamental difference between the uses of photography in early Conceptual art and the concurrent development of photographic Modernism under the aegis of Szarkowski, is that Conceptual art openly embraced photography's functional and anti-aesthetic character, whereas Modernism actively suppressed this through aestheticism. As such this reintroduces the distinction between Modernism as a practice of self-reflection on the formal limits of a medium and the avant-garde as a theory of positional negation. Nauman, Barry, and Huebler and others were using the photographic document or snapshot in order to negate dominant artistic notions of taste and sensitivity and not as an advanced form of photographic practice. This means that the very thing that Modernism in painting and photography found so problematic

- photography's indexicality and ubiquity - becomes one more resource to question the hierarchies of taste and genre which prop up conservative ontologies of art. In this respect, we see a familiar avant-garde move being made on the part of these artists: the indexicality and infinite reproducibility of the photograph becomes a source of the 'primitivistic renewal' of the artist's autonomy. There are many complex registers of 'primitivism' in Conceptual art. Art & Language's intellectual delinquency, for instance, can be read as a good example of how a number of the tropes of the 'primitive' (the ugly, the philistine, the behaving badly) seek to distinguish the official and received, as managed and homogeneous, from the unofficial as the awkward, incompetent and heterogeneous. But what unites most Conceptual art in its disaffirmation of official Modernist taste is the valorization of the amateur, and this is particularly evident in the use of photography. The 'primitivistic' use of the photographic document carries with it the same message that many other 'primitivist' moves in art have carried in the twentieth century: the idea that the work of art is closer to 'ordinary' labour and the 'ordinary' skills of the artistic amateur than the dominant, professional institutions of art would have us believe. The use of the photographic in early Conceptual art, then, serves one overriding function: to question the concept of artistic sensibility enshrined in Modernist and traditional accounts of art practice. Thus we need to be clear that the use of photography in early Conceptual art is part of a continuing dialectic concerned with art and the division of labour that stretches back to the Russian revolution of 1917. Conceptual art's amateur is the direct descendant of Productivism's dissolution of aesthetics into artistic functionality.

But what is striking, however, is that until the mid-seventies in Britain in particular, this legacy played no part in the self-understanding of these artists and other artists using photography 'against the grain'. Consequently, the social content of early Conceptual art's use of photography has to be seen as very different in implication than the early avant-garde. Although Nauman *et al* may

identify demotically with the skills of the amateur and the non-specialist, the artists were not interested in replicating the social reportage of post-Revolutionary culture. There is no interest in turning the camera on social subjects in order to say something about social power, etc. At no point did the early conceptualists want to return to, or want to be confused with, the social documentarists. This changes, and of course can be subject to counterfactual evidence in the work of some artists (Dan Graham for example), but overall, the opening period of Conceptual art embraces the culturally disruptive function of photographic reportage only to withdraw it from the social world. This is because photography is soon submitted to an internal critique. In turning away from the ethical demands of photojournalism and the aesthetic ambitions of Modernism, the indexical function of photography undergoes a process of realignment. In his essay 'Marks of Indifference' for the MOCA Conceptual art show 'Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965-1975', Jeff Wall refers to this as a process of *subjectivization*.[187] The reportorial capacities of photography are turned on the activity of the artist and his everyday social relations. But if this subjectivization is widespread we need to get from the fact of this shift to why it took place and with what ends in view. Wall overlooks most of the details of this shift because he is more concerned with dealing with the impact of performance on Conceptual art.

I would argue that the turn to photography as a means of documenting the art event is a readjustment of the space of the 'real' within photography, and as such presages the idea, so prevalent in the 1980s, of the staged photograph as constructed biography. Thus it is not good enough to say that Bruce Nauman, for example, was using photography simply to document what he was doing in the studio as a 'sculptor', and therefore was only concerned with transferring the studio activity into an image of that activity. Rather, Nauman's early photographs

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[187] Jeff Wall, '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual art', in 'Reconsidering the Object of Art', op cit p253

(*Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966) present a readjustment in perception about where the photographer might situate himself or herself within the photographic process of 'truth-telling'. To enact something as an event for the camera, something as banal as spitting out a fountain of water, is not merely to produce a photograph of a 'performance' but to opt for the possibility that photography might have established a very different relationship to the 'real' than conventionally supposed. These are photographs which also represent the externalization of states of consciousness. They therefore disrupt, in casual, humorous and at times inane ways, the privilege given to certain high-serious identities in art and photography, in particular the idea of the anonymous author in Modernism (as a rejection of the bad-form of self-description and autobiography) and the idea of the photographer as objective witness. Both these identities presume a relationship to truth which stands outside, or athwart, the representation of the everyday as 'microscopic' and pathological. As Nauman himself says, "It ... had to do with trying to make a less important thing to look at".[188]

This pointing at things that are 'less important to look at' reasserts photography's powers of ostension. By ostension I mean pointing out an object to someone by directing their attention to it. Now of course photography is the ostensive medium par excellence. Its indexical relationship to the world of objects and events is no more nor less a form of 'pointing', and 'pointing to' and 'pointing at' necessarily contribute to our knowledge of the world.[189] But, as I have explained, analytic conceptualism tended to separate the ostensive act of 'showing something' from

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[188] Bruce Nauman quoted in Josepth Kosuth, 'Information 2', *Art After Philosophy and After*, op cit p59

[189] The camera, however, does not point in the *same* way as fingers point. I do not point out a particular kind of butterfly to a friend by showing them a photograph of that butterfly, although I might point to a photograph of the butterfly saying "this is a Red Admiral, look out for it when we go for a walk". Pointing by finger then is a *direct nomination* of an object, in real time: "this is.." or "look there..." or "that (...) seems dangerous".

'meaning something'. If I have shown how difficult this is to accept once we acknowledge the part perceptual acquaintance plays in our conceptual abilities, this becomes clearer once we understand the singularly important part ostension plays in human communication. An ostensive act is always an inferential one. That is, to point something out is make a claim on its significance or value. Thus someone who engages in ostensive behaviour makes manifest a number of assumptions about his or her actions. Consequently it can be argued that the pointing out of something always entails the recovery of the intentions behind the act even if information about such intentions are minimal initially. From this we might then argue that even where the recognition of intentions are weak some recovery of meaning nevertheless does take place based on the ability of the subject to infer meaning from the available evidence. Thus, for instance, the illocutionary force of a gesture might provide the possible direction in which the relevance of the gesture is sought. 'Showing forth' and the recovery of meaning, therefore, are always part of the same cognitive act. In their work on ostensive communication Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson draw on the implications of this to argue for a revaluation of human communication. In a suggestive commentary on linguistic theory they argue that verbal communication is never principally about the mutual understanding of intentions or the decoding of signs. "Human intentional communication is never a mere matter of coding and decoding. The fact is that human external languages do not encode the kind of information that humans are interested in communicating. Linguistically encoded semantic representations are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent anything of interest". [190] As such processes of decoding are never autonomous. They are always positioned within an inferential framework, particularly when those decoding processes are involved in forms of communication where information about intentions are not manifest, such as art. The implications of this for photography are obviously

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[190] Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Basil Blackwell 1986, p174

enormous. The photographic document is not so much an inert nomination of things in the world, but a source of inferential complexity. I would argue therefore that subjectivization in early conceptual photography involves a recognition of this at the level of how it organizes its materials in front of the camera. To photograph yourself spurting out water is to draw on the ostensive powers of photography in ways that are expressly allegorical rather than descriptive. As such this refusal to invest in the would-be objective truth of photography or its aesthetic validation has important implications for the debate on iconophobia in Conceptual art. To nominate the 'pathological' and 'trivial' as the subjects of snapshot photography clearly shows that iconophobia is not only internal to analytic conceptualism; photo-conceptualism and analytic conceptualism are permeated by it in various ways and to various degrees. Nauman, Huebler and Barry all produce images, which in their resistance to pictorialism and spectacularization, take up a distance from an easy sensuality.

Overall what unites the early American photo-based Conceptual art and analytic conceptualism is an ethics of amateurism. The absolute disregard for Modernist notions of high-seriousness and professionalism positions them in a similar kind of D-I-Y space. Both treat the issue of art's autonomy as a matter of disabling the link between aesthetic performance and artistic value. This is why it is important to recognise that the American photo-conceptualists expressed their disregard for photographic history as avant-garde *artists* not as avant-garde photographers. What counted above all else was that the work looked as if it could be made by anyone; and this was the last thing that professional photographers wanted to be identified with.

This disregard for photography as a medium, however, is very different in Britain during the late sixties and early seventies. In fact, it is Britain during this period that photographic conceptualism undergoes a widespread social reevaluation. We can point to precedents in the USA (for instance Dan Graham's *Homes for*

America, 1966-67), but it is in Britain where photography and Conceptual art takes on a qualitatively different direction. The reasons for this are complex, but suffice it to say, the development of a sophisticated indigenous Marxist culture, the rise of film studies, the importation of French structuralism, and the energy of a popular counter-culture produced a context in which many kinds of interesting work on the social meanings of art could be pursued. In this respect from 1970-76 we see a very different sense of how photography in art might distinguish itself from Modernism and photojournalism. Armed with a stronger sense of the historical development and contingency of the avant-garde than the Americans, in Britain avant-garde photography positions itself as a critique of the avant-garde itself. This leads to a more thoroughgoing assessment of how photography stands in relation to its wider conditions of production and consumption.

In 1969 John Stezaker and Victor Burgin were both working with photography within the framework of analytic conceptualism, although Burgin never strictly adopted the voice of the philosopher-as-artist. His aversion to this was there from the start. Nevertheless in his early *Photopath* (1969) (a photographic *trompe l'oeil* of the gallery floor) there is a Kosuth-like play with different orders of reference and questioning of the formal boundaries of sculptural identity. Does a photographic representation of a section of the gallery floor constitute a sculptural 'event' or is the photograph just a photograph of the floor? John Stezaker, however, is more direct about the need for an art of propositional critique. In photo-texts and essays between 1969 and 1971 he takes on the voice of the self-scrutinizing Wittgensteinian. As he argues in 'The Necessity of Categories' (1971) "Art activity must...house theoretical conjectures concerning its own identity in the absence of a priori concepts of art. Thus discovery and construction must be reconciled within a single activity".[191] In a photo-text book

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[191] John Stezaker, 'The Necessity of Categories', *Beyond Painting &Sculpture,* works bought for the Arts Council by Richard Cork, Arts Council 1973, p29. See also 'Introduction to 'Categories'', in *A Survey of the Avant-garde in Britain,* Vol 2, Gallery House London, 1972. "We cannot hope to forward at this point a precise and well-defined concept of the concept of art as this is logically subsequent to first developing some

completed in 1971, like Kosuth and Burgin, he deals with the non-identity between photography and its referents. At one point he writes: " 1) Series of photographs each representing 1/000 sec of the history of a fountain. 2). 1 photograph representing 1 sec of the history of a fountain".[192] This sense of the instability of photographic representation is explored through the book in a series of images engaged reflexively with like and unlike. By 1973 though both artists had dropped the work on propositional content in order to open out a space for discussion of the social production of meaning. Burgin to a large extent got there 'first', with less investment in analytic conceptualism he began to look at photographs as a source of connection to order of knowledge governed by the social function of photography under capitalism. As he was to say in 'Margin Note' written for *A Survey of the Avant-garde in Britain in 1972:* "As the domain of art therefore is the domain of those sign systems by whose means social reality, that is to say *ideology*, is constituted and disseminated then it cannot be 'value-free'".[193] Hence art (photography) is "useful" to the degree it "disarticulate(s)" social codes and contradicts ideological norms.[194]

This is a very different kind of language (borrowed principally from Barthes' *Elements of Semiology*) and proposes a different kind of critical function for photography. Photography is for the first time since the 1920s and 30s inserted into an explicitly politically counter-hegemonic space. As such the issue of use-value is something that the American photo-conceptualists and analytic conceptualists had great difficulty squaring with their negation of the professional categories and aspirations of art. Burgin's alignment of photography with a semiotic critique of the rhetorics of mass culture appeared to restore an

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concept of art" (p10)

[192] John Stezaker, *Works 1969-71*, unpublished and unpaginated

[193] Victor Burgin, 'Margin Note', in *A Survey of the Avant-garde in Britain*, op cit p18

[194] Victor Burgin, ibid p18

unacceptable faith in the social function of art, even if Burgin was at pains to talk about the need for artists to act 'as if' art was socially effective. This precipitated another ideological struggle within Conceptual art as Burgin (and later Stezaker) began to use photography not just as a way out of analytic conceptualism but as a means of critiquing the idea of the avant-garde itself. Indeed in Britain in the early seventies the debate on photography moves overwhelmingly into a discussion of popular culture and mass culture.

If semiotics provides the initial point of theoretical access to this, it is the wider impact of Situationist theory (Debord's *Société du Spectacle* had been translated in 1969), and the students' movement and the new counter-culture that provides the political framework. Situationism, with its emphasis upon the destablization of the sign as a political act, provided photography with a further set of interrogative tools. This in turn established a route back to the cultural debates of the 1920s and 1930s, although the serious genealogical work on the early avant-garde wasn't done until the late seventies. One artist who pursued the Situationist turn was John Stezaker. But if Stezaker shares with Burgin a desire for a practice which rejects the iconophobia of the avant-garde, he does not share Burgin's - or the Situationists' - faith in the political use-value of photography. That is, he argues, that the political option of semiotic-practice reinvests art with the rhetoric of artistic exclusion and therefore continues to support an isolationist view of artistic practice and cultural politics. Touching on issues in the early seventies that now overwhelmingly preoccupy a younger generation of artists, he demands a practice which engages with the forms and images of popular culture as a shared realm of meaning, of pleasure and alienation. As he outlined in 1973 the job of a post-avant-garde art is "to expose social values inherent in modes of communication without using the avant-garde convenience of separating the form of exposure from the realm of social ideology".[195] In other words, the artist must

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[195] John Stezaker, Statement, *Arte inglese oggi 1960-76*, British Council/Comune di Milano, Palazzo Reale, Milan 1976, p399

drop his or her fear of the stereotype, cliche and worn-out in order to open out to the social world as lived by most people. As a consequence, it is the appropriated or found image which is at the centre of Stezaker's concerns, for it is the appropriated or found image which allows direct access to the realm of social ideology by virtue of the fact that such images are embedded within previous uses and histories. Hence particular forms of appropriated imagery such as advertising or the picture postcard, are highly suitable as triggers for collective experience. Thus what the appropriated image allows Stezaker to do is narrow the cognitive and social gap between an experience of the popular in art and specialist forms of artistic attention. The result is that the rhetorics of popular forms of representation - the way images position the subject ideologically - are exposed *through* the process of re-contextualization and manipulation.

In these terms Stezaker's turn to found imagery as a common source of myth and desire extends the debate on the ethics of the amateur within Conceptual art. For what Stezaker becomes is a collector of the photographic image and therefore, by implication, an archivist of the industrially produced image. This collecting of what has lost been lost or remaindered through consumption is systematic in its endeavours in a way that the early American photo-conceptualists transformation of the found photograph into a 'readymade' is not. In Ruscha, Huebler and Barry, in particular, there is a greater preoccupation with the interchangeable and repeatable possibilities of the found image. For what counted for those artists was how the minimalist principles of repetition and quantification might undermine issues of good taste and composition. They were not interested in the found image as a social resource. Moreover, despite their antipathy to professional categories of photography, they also remained photographers. Stezaker, on the other hand, only worked with found images. This is naturally not advantageous in itself, but the important issue, as regards the development and crisis of Conceptual art, is that as a collector and archivist of images Stezaker establishes a very different kind of subject position for the anti-Modernist and post-traditional

artist. As with all artists working under the mantle of Conceptual art, Stezaker's adoption of the voice of the amateur at this time is that of the anti-aesthete. But whereas analytic conceptualism substituted the critical nay-sayer and amateur philosopher for the connoisseur and sensitive 'emoter', Stezaker takes on the position of the 'fan' and memorialist. This of course owes something to Benjamin and the Surrealists; and interestingly it is the younger British Conceptual artists using photography who reintroduce this idea of the artist-as-rag-picker into the avant-garde arena in the early seventies. But more significantly, this derives from the idea of 'fan-knowledge' as a form of cultural capital which is not determined by academic standards of success. By this I mean that in the early postcard pieces and montages Stezaker places a priority on his own immersion in the popular culture of the image. Thus the crucial issue for Stezaker's post-avant-garde artist is about how the artist might find a working relationship to the photographic image which is not intellectually superior to the culture which produced it. This is not to substitute Marx's or Wittgenstein's sceptic for Peter Winch's anthropologist, but a recognition - as with Art & Language - that radicalism in art invariably comes with the privileges of education and class.

In this respect concern about "new spectator requirements" becomes a debate about what relationship the artist is to have to what kinds of artistic materials. What Stezaker's archivist sets out to do is rewrite the ideological contest between 'stating' and 'nominating' in the interests of common identifications. But rather than treating nomination as the avant-garde photo-conceptualist might as the transformation of the 'everyday' into *art*, he treats the incorporation of the found image into art as co-extensive with the pleasures of popular culture itself. Naming and identifying does not operate as the imprimatur of avant-garde brinkmanship, but as a relay to shared pleasures and knowledges. For Stezaker, at least, this had as much to do with his own perception of himself as a 'book artist', as much as a gallery artist. Working as an archivist of the 'culturally remaindered' his relationship to the image led him inevitably to organize his material as readable

sequences and series' and therefore to the problem of the most appropriate form in which to display the material. In this light Stezaker's interest in the book form is no different from many other artists using photography and text during the period. As Germano Celant boomed at the time "the book becomes the most accessible medium...for creating art".[196] Of course it didn't, but as a means of collating the work of the image-archivist it at least proved very successful at undermining the Modernist preoccupation with the singular aesthetic experience.

This opening up of Conceptual art through the found image to the insubordinate and seductive pleasures of popular culture had a radical effect on the use of photography in Conceptual art in Britain from 1973. A clear cultural reorientation takes place as a number of younger artists identify with photography not just as a negation of Modernist taste, but as the source of a wider debate on the social function of the artist and the social production of meaning. In the work of John Hilliard and Alexis Hunter, for instance, by 1973-4 there is a recognition that a critical understanding of the use of photography within popular culture might offer a way out of both Modernist aestheticism and the ironic forms of nomination of West-coast photo-conceptualism. Thus what distinguishes Hilliard's and Hunter's work is the actual extension of the photographic document into an engagement with popular representational practices (advertising, fashion photography, photo-romans) and popular genre derived from film and literature (romantic drama, horror). In its view that the dominant forms of the culture industry demands from the artist something other than Frankfurt-school disengagement or populist replication, this is close in spirit to Stezaker and Burgin. The post-avant-garde artist should, in a sense, work from inside the alienated materials of the dominant culture, and therefore trust the forms of art to their powerful collective focus. But unlike Stezaker, in particular, Hilliard and Hunter appropriate popular representional practices for their narrative seductions and literary inclusiveness. In effect their passage through Conceptual art is as

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[196] Germano Celant, *Book as Artwork, 1960/72*, Nigel Greenwood 1972

oblique story-tellers.

Story-telling would seem to proscribe much discussion of Conceptual art. Nevertheless if we recognise the allegorical base of the story-teller's art we can trace its presence through the whole debate on photography in conceptualism. Nauman's early photographic studies are no more no less than autobiographical fragments, narrative glimpses from the studio. Similarly Keith Arnatt's work from 1969 offers an extraordinary subjectivization of the photographic document. From *Self-Burial* (1969) through to *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow* (1971), he uses his presence or absent presence in a series of masochistically inflected studies on artistic alienation. In *Self-Burial* his gradual disappearance into the ground from one panel to the next is a pointed commentary on the thesis of art's so-called dematerialization under conceptualism. Here we see the artist quite literally enacting his own cultural marginalization. As Arnatt was to say in 1973: " I see no reason why the range of experiences that an artist can deal with should not include the difficulties he experiences as an artist".[197] For Arnatt then, the use of photography was primarily a means of reflecting back on the pathologies of the artistic subject; and it is these pathologies as a story-board of the 'everyday' that so obviously divides the ostensive powers of photography from its critics. Arnatt's photography fills out the de-differentiated subject of analytic conceptualism with all kinds of messy emotions and feelings that from the position of a strict rational critique of artistic a priorism would appear to be illicit.

Both Arnatt and Hilliard began their careers as sculptors, and like many artists of their generation first turned to photography to document the temporal nature of their work. This idea of the photograph as a marker of the impermanent was initially a critical response to minimalism. The would-be sensitivity to the contextual reading of the artwork in minimalism was in fact belied by the restrictive monumentality of its geometric forms and its gallery-based location.

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[197] Keith Arnatt, Statement, *Beyond Painting & Sculpture*, op cit, p38

The photographic document then offered a way of bringing back information about sculptural activities from contexts that were not restricted to the gallery. The photograph became an inseparable structural component of the art-experience. However, this turn to the photograph as a first-order artwork was soon subject to a process of internal aestheticization. Richard Long and Hamish Fulton were happy to settle for a kind of conceptual-pictorialism; a perfect example of photographic nomination as the reinscription of tradition painterly forms. Hilliard though, like Arnatt, broke with the incipient pictorialism of the photo-as-sculptural-document by incorporating his self-image into a commentary on the conditions of photographic production itself. In a series of moves reminiscent of developments in structuralist film-making at the time, Hilliard drew attention to the produced nature of photographic truth-telling by photographing himself photographing, or photographing the same object at different exposures and on different papers, (*12 Representations of Colour*, 1971). The work from this period (1970-73) is perhaps the only photo-based Conceptual art which is actually discursively engaged with the mechanics and chemistry of the photographic document.

By 1973, to return to previous comments, this singularly materialist emphasis on the construction of photographic-truth had been incorporated into the broader area of the social function of photography. Hilliard extended his concern with the potential misreading of images inherent in all photographic perception, to a concern with the narrative suggestiveness of image and text, reminiscent of photo-love stories. This produced a shift in the context of Conceptual art in Britain, which was as significant in its way as Stezaker adopting the role of the archivist: that is, the production of the photograph becomes a matter of its 'filmic' staging. Of course the staged photograph is nothing new; and early photo-Conceptual art's turn to self-representation has a direct route back to the domestic photographs of the Surrealists, in particular Claude Cahun. But in this instance staging becomes a matter of employing and disarticulating the dramatic

forms of popular culture, of arraigning and simulating them. To stage the image, essentially, means staging the conditions of the photograph's mass consumption, and this usually means addressing issues of sexuality and sexual difference. The implications of this were not lost on Alexis Hunter in 1973, as the increasing dissolution of Conceptual art as the first generation of anti-Modernists, is helped on its way by the emergence of the first generation of feminists into art. In *Voyeurism* (1973), for instance, there is a qualitative transformation in the role of the staged figure, insofar the cinematic sequencing of Hunter disguising and revealing herself becomes self-consciously attached to issues of social and sexuality identity, prefiguring the whole development of late Conceptual art into the photo-conceptualism and identity politics of the 1980s. In essence, the staging of photographic and filmic genres is further evidence of the embodying of Conceptual art at the expense of its ideal spectator. The series of works Hunter made in 1976, *Approaches to Fear*, is a vivid example of the cultural tensions being played around this. Although Hunter's work is indebted to the alignment in the early seventies between Conceptual art, Marxism and feminism, *Approaches to Fear* derives its primary source of engagement with questions of gender and identity from the seductions and fascinations of popular culture. The burning of a high-heeled shoe in front of the camera is clearly the work of someone keen to align critical consciousness in art with non-specialist forms of attention. As a result it was characterized as the worst kind of capitulation to iconophilia. For by 1975 the iconophobic impulses of early Conceptual art had passed into the feminist critique of popular culture as evidence of one of the principle sites of women's self-alienation. There was little space for work which commandeered some of the allure of popular genres such as the horror film. Thus, it is the turn to the conditions of consumption of images that contributes to Conceptual art's final crisis in 1975-76, as a whole number of demands about the reembodiment of the spectator and the need for the repositioning of the artist within the culture fill out the conceptual programme of cultural disaffirmation and artistic reflexivity, and prepare the ground for a series of other struggles about the ethics of

representation.

One artist who also represents this final playing out of the iconophobic-iconophilia dialectic in Conceptual art is David Lamelas. Lamelas worked in London at the height of Conceptual art, arriving from Argentina in 1968. Like Hilliard he moves from a materialist engagement with photographic truth - in his early urban photographs of Brussels and Dusseldorf he deals with the instability of the representation of the photographic event - to treatment of the photograph as part of an imaginary film script or projection of his own fantasies of omnipotence, (*Rock Star*, 1974). For example *The Violent Tapes* (1975) is a sequence of 10 black and white photographs of a fictional chase, borrowed in its *mis en scene* from the seventies TV cop show. The man and woman are being chased by mysterious (corporate?) assailants who are intent on retrieving a film tape the couple are carrying. This tape consists of sensitive documentary material of a violent nature. We assume that the couple have either stolen the tape or have made it. The play with the unstable truth-conditions of the photographic event is still evident, but this is directed outwards to the conditions under which the dominant relations of capitalist culture exist: censorship, a prurient interest in the victims of violence, and the violent denigration of the culture's critics. What we see therefore is the threat of violence as the threat of censorship or even death. Thus, unlike TV Cop shows the violence is implied, leaving the representation of actual violence outside of the frame. What this presents, I would suggest, is the iconophobic inclusion of the representation of violence within the iconophilic framework of a post-avant-garde art, an art which in sense can no longer avoid the cultural evidence of such violence. For the question of violence is more than a simple matter of Lamelas's own artistic concerns; it traverses the whole historical period. Conceptual art emerged out of violence, the violence of American imperialism and the Vietnam war. To say that Conceptual art saw itself in resistance to the cultural effects of American imperialism does not mean that Conceptual art was thereby concerned with the problems of political

representation in textual form (although politics and the value of propaganda of course became a central point of dispute about the direction of analytic conceptual around 1972). Rather the politics of anti-imperialism were inscribed in the forms of iconophobia itself, as if the spectacle of violence could only be challenged by de-aestheticizing the visual. This may sound contentious in the light of analytical conceptualism's scepticism about the social function of art, but Conceptual art's rejection of the discourse of the aesthete was, I would contest, a negation of the social 'blindness' of the aesthete's sensitivity: the fact the aesthete can never tolerate the social fact of violence, even as he or she is consuming it as an image. Furthermore the end of Conceptual art coincides with the beginning of the women's movement and the 'beginning' - in public, legalistic, moral and cultural terms - of actual and symbolic violence against women. The representation of violence, therefore, hangs over Conceptual art, extending the iconophobic-iconophilic dialectic into areas where it never ventured before. Lamelas's *The Violent Tapes* is a product of this constellation of forces, turning to violence as the secret code of the image under capitalism, but rejecting in good iconophobic terms its actual representation. The pressures to do otherwise, of course, is the history of the last twenty years, as the embodied spectator of art has come to share the same place as the embodied consumer of popular culture.

If this kind of work presages fundamental changes in the uses of photography, nevertheless it is around this time that Art & Language begin to attack what they describe as 'Semio-art'. In *Dialectical Materialism* (1975) and *Above Us the Waves* (1976) they use photographic reproductions of Armenian Socialist Realist paintings and WW11 illustrations respectively with ironic texts about the social claims of 'Semio-art', their specific target being Burgin. Although the group invariably use the skills of the graphic artist (particularly around this period) the use of photo-text here is clearly designed to embarrass or 'see-off' what they perceive as the idealism of photo-based conceptualism. In his history of the group and Conceptual art *Essays on Art & Language*, Charles Harrison re-endorses this

position. But there is a world of difference between the necessary rejection of the idealist claims of those who assume that photography is more democratic than painting, or that art can be a direct extension of ideological struggle, and reduction of all photographic practices to some amorphous 'Semio art'. In doing this Harrison can then conveniently identify this mythical 'Semio art' with the crudity of advertising and propaganda, and therefore the suppression of reflected thought. The satirical voice of the work is not served by the comparison of 'Semio art' to the "falsehoods of journalism".[198] Whether Harrison is referring specifically and only to Burgin, or Burgin's followers, this kind of deflation is the kind of shibboleth which produces a history of Conceptual art without any dialectical self-consciousness. It is no surprise therefore that Art & Language experienced its own internal crisis over the identity of photography, image and text, when Terry Atkinson left in 1974. When Atkinson departed in dispute over the future of the group and the role of the Index, a vast 'language community' of shared and disputed ideas presented in the form of index cards, he produced a series of photo-texts pieces, *The Bridging Works*, combining historical images (WW1 and the commune) with long satirical captions mimicking the operations of the Index itself. If this was Atkinson's own version of Art & Language's "black propaganda", [199] unlike Art & Language at the time Atkinson was absolutely serious about exploring the possibilities of an ironized representational post-conceptual practice. As Atkinson was to write fifteen years later: "This bridging work appropriated A & L motifs from the Indexing and grafted onto them, capriciously and brutally, motifs which I took to be anti-A&L". [200] The ideological fall-out from this, however, has been to turn the shared iconophobic-iconophilic conditions under which the initial dispute was played out into a matter of personal positioning. That is, both Art & Language and Terry Atkinson

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[198] ibid, p137

[199] ibid, p139

[200] Terry Atkinson, *The Indexing*... op cit, p12

were far more embedded in a wider cultural argument about the challenges of representation than they both could or were prepared to admit in 1974 and 1975.

Thus far from reducing the Conceptual art to an inert pictorialism, photography actually opened out a range of working possibilities for art during the period 1966-1976. In this I agree with Jeff Wall: "It could be said that it was photography's role and task to turn away from Conceptual art, away from reductionism and its aggressions". [201] The history of Conceptual art, therefore, will be traduced if the complex positioning of the photograph is not given its due. Because if we need to address the social and political contexts in which the iconophobic-iconophilic dialectic is embedded this in turn cannot be separated from the recurrent place and function of the photographic document within the twentieth century avant-garde. Through Constructivism, Productivism and Surrealism, photography has served to disinvest the voice of the aesthete in the name of the 'ordinary' user and spectator. This same sense of aesthetic disinvestment through the indexical and ostensive resources of photography passed through Conceptual art, although with the barest historical consciousness of what this disinvestment had stood for. As Benjamin Buchloh points out with some accuracy: it was precisely "the utopianism of earlier avant-garde movements...that was manifestly absent from Conceptual art".[202] If this is what constitutes the sorrows of Conceptual art, it also points to the fact that the artists who were involved were young - sometimes very young - and were mostly winging it. The problem with writing about Conceptual art, therefore, is that the moves it made, the strategies it adopted - across a range of artistic positions - were contingent and messy responses to shifting and sometimes unfocussed questions and issues. This is why it is mistaken to hold Conceptual art as somehow responsible for the collapse of Western cultural values and cultural

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[201] Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference"', op cit p266

[202] Benjamin Buchloh, '*Conceptual art 1962-1969*, op cit p141.

continuity, as Thierry de Duve does in *Kant After Duchamp*. Although for opposite reasons to Charles Harrison, like Harrison he flattens out the heterogeneity of Conceptual art in his defence of what he believes to have been eroded by its idealisms. He does this by conveniently eliding Conceptual art with Kosuth's suppression of aesthetics. So the failure of Conceptual art becomes the inability to suppress aesthetics in the name of art. As such Kosuth's fantasy of exclusion is made to stand for a position that few other Conceptual artists actually held. The failure of Conceptual art is simply the disappointment experienced knowing that artworks cannot avoid being subject to aesthetic appraisal. This is to judge Conceptual art as if its only value is as a contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics. De Duve barely addresses Conceptual art as an *artistic* culture, as a conversation between specialist and non-specialist knowledges, and when he does acknowledge this he demeans it: "Those were the days my friend, enthralling days, liberating days, and yet, in the long run, sterile".[203] Thus it is particularly revealing when he says "conceptualism remains unsatisfactory",[204] as if conceptualism claimed to offer anything other than its own lack of "satisfaction". On the contrary Conceptual art embraced dissatisfaction as a matter of principle. In this it provided a range of forms and strategies that opened up how art might make sense of its historical dysfunctionality; hence the importance of photography, particularly in the light of the art of the last twenty years. For the emergence of a reflexive photography out of the iconophobic strategies of analytic conceptualism made it possible to produce a representational art that avoided many of the problems of iconophilia. As such, far from conceptualism's unruliness delivering the absolute negation of art, it demanded that the artist (and critic) be attentive to their own conditions of production in the face of the increasing professionalization of the modern art institution. In this, its delinquencies continue to demand our attention.

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[203] Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, op cit p300

[204] De Duve, ibid, p300

Chapter 6: The logics of deflation: the avant-garde and the fate of the photographic snapshot

The widespread recourse in contemporary art to the scrappy snapshot (and text), or the wall of abutted snapshots, is marked by a set of moves familiar from the use of photography in the 20th century avant-garde: the derogation of aesthetic ideology in those forms where it most obviously and pervasively prevails. This is because photographic snapshots (both found or taken, on instamatics or 35mm cameras) are perhaps the quickest and most efficient means of deposing the traditional categories of art and the norms of artistic professionalism. Cheap, multiple and spontaneous the snapshot invests art with a non-artistic 'ordinariness'. In the 1980s, with the improvement of machine printing, the inscription of the snapshot with this deaestheticizing 'ordinariness' began to systematize itself as a post-conceptual move as artists began increasingly to exhibit the new higher-quality prints without framing or manipulation. Today the cheap machine print is now the ubiquitous form of the new neo-conceptual art. Indeed, the machine print snapshot is currently identified by artists as a kind of constitutive marker of avant-garde identity: the image that fails the test of aesthetic repleteness and creative 'mastery'. The use of such photographs, then, has always been very much an issue of the ethics and economics of form and artistic identity. In denying the customary pleasures of scale, complexity, and sensuousness of surface, the snapshot, in its various manifestations, reflects on the institutional functions of advanced art and on aesthetic ideology.

But today, crucially, the place where aesthetic ideology prevails is not where it has usually prevailed for much of the history of the avant-garde: the artisanal arts of painting. With the subsumption of the production and reception of art under new media, aesthetic ideology is now inscribed *within* the advanced technological

relations of art. Contemporary art's recourse to the photographic snapshot, then, is unprecedented. Its anti-aestheticism is based, not on a response to the institutional dominance of painting, but on the institutional dominance of photography, film and video. It is unable, therefore, to follow the usual strategy of negation of aesthetic ideology pursued by many of the avant-gardes last century: the appropriation of the non-art or anti-art character of documentary photography as a way of removing art from the institutional power of the 'aesthetizing gaze'. For, in the light of the general incorporation of photography into the category of art, documentary practice itself has now become subject to the vast filmic transformation of the conditions of artistic production and reception. There has been a general convergence of interests between the ambitions of artists to transform the scale and mode of address of photography into that of the big-production modern technological image, and the systematization of the technological image on a vast, planetary scale. Thus, if the new filmic conditions of production have legitimatised a grand, staged or composite photographic History Painting, as in Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky, it has also produced an upscaling of the snapshot itself, as in the 'transgressive' social realism of Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham and Boris Mikhailov. [205] These latter visions of abjection, self-hate, sexual disclosure and sub-criminality have shattered the boundaries between the public, appelative conventions of an older documentary photography and the illicit realms of pornography, the police archive and mass cultural voyeurism generally. The result is that the negation of aesthetic ideology can no longer be performed so easily in the *name of photography* , as it was for almost fifty years through the years of the early Soviet and German avant-gardes up to Conceptual art. The photographic document as a source of illicit or illicitly ordinary experiences is now thoroughly incorporated

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[205] This does not mean, that the language of technologically advanced photography is necessarily uncritical of theories of auteurship; photographers such as Wall and Gursky are involved in a complex and collective division of labour, and this remains central to the view of themselves as critical practioners. The idea of themselves as collaborators is crucial to the ambitious scale and content of their work. But, this ambition, nonetheless, is not an unmediated 'given' within the new institutions of art.

into the post-painting category of photography-as-art, photography-as-History Painting. Hence, what is at stake now, is how photography might produces its critical differences and disclosures in world where the photographic document has been brought into alignment with the production of advanced art and its institutions.

In this way the ideological role of the snapshot in art in the1990s has been essentially deflationary. That is, the snapshot doesn't simply reverse or block photography's institutional aspirations to the status of painting, but challenges the spectacularization and the reification of the advanced technological image *as such.* Accordingly, the casual and low-key use of the snapshot reinscribes one of the significant and and unifying strategies of all 20th century avant-gardes: the testing of art's dominant modes of reception through various kinds of artistic deskilling or destablization.

One of the key strategies of negation of modernism and the avant-garde is the self-conscious adoption on the part of the artist of various formal moves or conceptual strategies which test the competence of prevailing artistic skills and procedures. By failing to meet preconceived conditions of skill, the performance of 'incompetence' becomes a means of challenging or qualifying the boundaries of would-be professional practice. Conceptual Art, as much as various versions of Expressionism, could be said to perform different kinds of 'incompetence' in this way, as I outlined in the last chapter. On these grounds, modernism and the avant-garde, share, essentially, an understanding that the modern *in* art, is the place where notions of skill and value are continually tested and retested. This is why what largely mediates the question of deskilling is the artist's identification with the amateur - for it is the amateur who is practised, so to speak, in those skills that fail the test of dominant cultural validation. In aspiring and failing, aspiring and failing, the amateur becomes a symbol of authentic toil.[206] However, the avant-

[206] See 'The Practice of Failure', in this volume.

garde artist doesn't actually aspire to the status of the amateur. Rather, he or she borrows from, and performs, the amateur's lack of dominant cultural expertise metonymically as a critique of what is falsely excluded from the experience of art, or what is reified in its name. This is why photography, and in particular the snapshot, has played such a crucial role in the dialectic of anti-aestheticism and anti-art from Surrealism through to Conceptual Art. The snapshot's intimacy with the banal, the contingent and 'ordinary' not only challenges the hierarchy of artistic skills, but continually challenges which subjects are held to constitute legitimate aesthetic experience.

In these terms the snapshot has been a highly efficient means of not only stripping down the inflated artisanal skills of the traditional artist, but of questioning the academic, professional aggrandisement of modern art. This is why it is no surprise that the snapshot has come into its own again in the neo-conceptualism of the 1990s. For in the late1980s and 1990s photography has not only experienced a rapid ascendancy into the older category of History Painting, but the various strategies of deskilling identified with the photographic practices of an older avant-garde (desubjectivization, masquerade, repetition) have themselves become, under the auspices of postmodernism, part of a new critical academy. Postmodernism's deconstruction of the author, identity and representation may have unblocked some of the cultural prejudices and infirmities of Modernist theory, but it also presented the contemporary artist with the disabling spectre of the academicization of critique itself as the museum opened its doors to the new postmodernist practices. The outcome is that a younger generation has had to reassess the photographic content of these strategies of deskilling in the wake of the fact that photography now finds itself inside the portals whose power it once criticised. The staged cibachrome and the upscaled snapshot, then, are only two aspects of the general assimilation of photography into the new museum. After Conceptual art, after critical postmodernism photography is now coextensive with the reinvention of the

modern art institution itself. This is why the current use of the snapshot (be it singularly or as part of a combinatory aesthetic) is not simply a return to the anti-aesthetic informality of Conceptual art. It is a reengagement and repositioning of the snapshot's deflationary logic in a system where the history of such strategies are now institutionally familiar and canonically anointed. The deflationary content of the contemporary snapshot is something, therefore, that is *constituted, framed and mediated* by its own critical assimilation.

On this score the casual, anti-aesthetic use of the snapshot today demonstrates two related functions: on the one hand, it reinscribes an older demotic, partisan view of photography as non-art and anti-art; and on the other, it attempts to deflate the theatrical-scaled, high-end ambitions of the new museum-based post-conceptual art. It draws generally, therefore, on what historically has been one of the snapshot's self-proclaimed virtues: its intimacy and obdurate domesticity. If, in the world of the spectacle all images slide towards radical interchangeability; in the domesticated world of the snapshot the image is reconnected to specific life histories and everyday contingencies - hence the singular connection between the snapshot and the time and space of autobiography and biography. Principally, the snapshot is a conversational form. In its connection to the 'intersubjective' and the 'familial', the 'diaristic' and the 'confessional' it produces a performative intimacy with the political and cultural categories of the 'everyday', what Bourdieu calls the "instruments of intra-familial sociability".[207] We should be wary, therefore, of overstating the discontinuity between the upscaled snapshot and the aesthetically 'evasive' contemporary snapshot - despite the latter's deflation of the former's ambitions. The contemporary snapshot actually brings into new forms of alignment those aspects of snapshot ideology in post-conceptualism that the new 'museum-assimilated' photography has tended to

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[207] Pierre Bourdieu, with Luc Boltanski, Robert Castel, Jean Claude Chamborden, Domnique Schapper *Photography: A Middle Brow Art*, [*Un art moyen*, Les Editions de Minuet,1965], Polity Press 1990, p26

submerge, or turn over to a spectacularized narcissism: the *ethics* of self-narration.

Since the late 1970s cultural theory and the new art history has placed a significant emphasis on photographic self-representation as a means of dissolving repressive processes of socialization. Consequently, when the critique of representation in cultural studies and the new art history dovetailed with the feminist critique of representation in photographic theory in the 1980s a generation of photographers who turned the camera on themselves did so on the basis of photography's powers of subjective disclosure. Nan Goldin is one such photographer, Jo Spence is another. This in turn owed something to the incorporation, after the1960s, of the photographic self-representation of the artist and his or her milieu into an expanded sense of portraiture, as in Andy Warhol and Bruce Nauman. In this way, scaling down the image, turning the camera on oneself or one one's friends and colleagues, on the routines and scenes of everyday life, has constituted a familiar way for the artist to retain their autonomy over their production and reconnect with both the familiar and non-conventionalised aspects of their immediate environment. Indeed, the power of these convergent traditions can even be seen in Gerhard Richter's work in the mid-1990s. In his huge photographic installation of found and taken snapshots, *Atlas*, Richter adapted Goldin and Spence-type notions of a counter-family album as a way of revealing the contingencies of his own working life in the studio and at home. The contemporary snapshot revisits these forms of self-representation and narration, but, significantly - and this is what extends its deflation of the aesthetic ambitions of the new high-end photography to a deflation of critical postmodernism proper - *without* the predetermining theoretical framework of the critique of identity and representation, and *without* the idea, as in the case of Richter and Warhol, of the snapshot acting as a kind democratizing entry into the high-cultural domain of the artist. Today, rather, the art-snapshot today tends to disperse itself *anonymously* into a post-conceptual world of deskilled skills, in

order to claim a broader democratizing and 'ordinary' identity between the art-snapshot and the non-art snapshot, as in the work of Nobuyoshi Araki, and other artists who have sought to dissolve the consumption of the domestically produced snapshot into the public space of the gallery. This is because the boundaries between professional artist, occasional artist and non-artist have been eroded in the1990s under the conjunction of post-conceptual aesthetics and popular access to new forms of visual technology, creating an elision between 'advanced aesthetics' and the aesthetics of the photographic amateur, and concomitantly a blurring between the 'good photograph'(the result of extensive labour and editing in the darkroom) and would-be 'bad photograph'(the instantaneous photograph taken as a private love-token or momento mori). And this is why the deflationary content of the snapshot is *functionally* different in relation to the non-art and anti-art content of photography in so much contemporary art.

Whereas in the 1980s the use of the snapshot sought to displace the high-cultural assimilation of photography into art on the basis of pursuing photography in non-art contexts (as in Spence), the high-cultural deflation of art today is shaped by the *mass democratising function of the new visual technologies themselves*: the producer of the snapshot in the gallery becomes coextensive with the producer of the snapshot outside of the gallery, and not simply the conduit through which the hierarchies of professional art practice are to be challenged or subverted. In this way the informality of the contemporary snapshot is evidence of a general ideological uncoupling of photography's democratic content from the critical photographic programmes within the professional domains of art; or rather, what has occured is transference of many of the critical impulses of these programmes in the 1980s from the confines of art theory into the popular domain of photographic production itself. Indeed, if the place of the snapshot in the contemporary artworld is characterised, in its reckoning with critical postmodernism, by its overwhelming withdrawal from the interventionist dictates and aims of content of the documentary tradition, this legacy of interventionism

now finds a systematic and critical voice in the widespread popular embrace of a counter-archival notion of snapshot photography outside of the artworld in the realm of the 'amateur' proper, in the emergence of the lomography phenomenon and indymedia.

Lomography and indymedia represent the current and significant *mass form* of the deflationary logic of the art-theoretical snapshot. Lomography is the generic and critical name given to photographs taken on the Russian instamatic camera the Lomo Kompakt Automatic. A well thought of, but relatively obscure camera, trading fitfully on the achievements of the old Soviet camera industry, the Lomo Kompakt was rediscovered by a group of young Vienna University students in the early 1990s. What distinguishes the camera is the high quality of the lens - for such an inexpensive camera - and the fact that the camera takes its snaps in quadruples, so on one print you can have four different views. Fired by the commitment to the camera, the students persuaded the company to allow them to be the sole distributors of the Lomo in Europe and North America. On the strength of this the St. Petersburg based company has expanded and is an unusual tale of post-communist market success. But most significantly, since the mid-1990s, particularly with the development of the Web, the camera has become the basis for an extraordinary proliferation of Lomo photo clubs and Lomo events on a global basis under the collective title of the Lomographic Society International. The LSI - the echoes of the Situationist International are not fortuitous - formulates various guidelines and procedures which each of the various Lomo organizations across the world host and develop. One of these is the A-Z City challenge, which involves would-be lomographers turning up at a prearranged place in a major city and being handed a roll of film, a map and a list of 26 suggestions or challenges which they must follow, as the basis for exploring and photographing the city. Another is the idea of designating a particular idea of theme that the lomographers must pursue, for instance being asked to photograph all things red in a given city, as was the case in Singapore in September 2001, or

being told to photograph blindfolded. The inventiveness and ambition of these 'shooting scripts' depends very much on the local organisers and circumstances. However, what unites all these events is their competitive and festive character. After the shoots, usually lasting two days, but sometimes longer, all the 'lomographer's' work is exhibited and then judged, with the best being identified as the work of "lomolympic champions". The exhibition and competition then, invariably, becomes a party and celebration of the lomographic spirit.

This events, publicized and archived on the Web, provide an extraordinary reminder of the ethos of the early Workers' Photography movement in the Soviet Union, the Weimar Republic and Britain in the 1920s. Photography becomes, on the one hand, the basis for a mass social archiving, and on the other, a reflection on the relationship between photographic truth and who is standing behind the camera. But, if lomography embraces a popular politics of self-representation and the counter-archive, it is a popular politics without a determinate political context, or without direct reference to documentary traditions of dissent and resistance. The critical languages in evidence are either resolutely diffident or historically vague, as in the Ten Golden Rules of Lomography. 1) Take your LOMO with you wherever you go; 2) Use it all the time, at any time - day & night; 3) Lomography does not interfere with your life, it's part of it; 4) Get as close as possible to the objects of your lomographic desire; 5) don't think; 6) be fast; 7) You don't have to know what's going to be captured on your film beforehand; 8) You don't have to know what's on the film afterwards either; 9) Shoot from the hip; 10) Don't worry about rule 10; or neo-Dadaist , as in the First International Lomoist Manifest (2002): "The lomoist cultural conspiracy encourages plagiarism because plagiarism saves time and effort, improves results and shows initiative on the part of the individual plagiarist". "We demand an end to culture, ethics and inwardness". "We demand the abolition of capitalism at 3pm on next Sunday". [208]

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[208] All quotes taken from Web Site,http://www1.lomo.com/orbiz/DigiTrade/0001/index.html

Clearly the Lomographic International is more than the sum of these parts. Those who participate in the organization obviously bring to it different commitments and interests, some of which will be critical of these proscriptions and guidelines. Yet the collected aperçus, manifestoes, and guidelines produce a certain philosophical and cultural tone, which is easily definable. Lomography conjoins the loucheness of Zen conceptualism (Yoko Ono) and the neo-Situationism of the Plagiarist art movement with the positivism of Mass Observation ('lomography is everywhere'). In this way lomography's refusal to name what lomography might pick out as critical, yet at the same time encourage the development of disciplinary guidelines within the framework of the representation of the 'city life', invokes the unitary urbanism of the Situationists, but without the group's incendiary notions of inversion, disruption and disturbance. On this basis, lomography is, rather, an *immersive urbanism*. Its commitment to the snapshot as a mass form is primarily about networking and the collectivization of creativity, and not to a model of vanguard cultural intervention. In this sense the loose collaborative ethos of lomography could be seen as a cultural expression of what Michael Hardt and Toni Negri have called the 'multitude': the constituent democratic power of the collective.[209] As an inclusive political category - the mass that refuses its constitution in law - Hardt's and Negri's concept of the 'multitude' is shot through with all kinds of indeterminacies and evasions, and gives away too much, despite its the authors' claims to the contrary, to conservative postmodern readings of class and identity. Nevertheless, what their notion provides, in fruitful ways, is an insight into how photographic technology is currently being used by a new generation of producers. For lomography photography *is* the space of the 'multitude': of

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[209] Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000.For Hardt and Negri the 'multitude' is another name for the power which is immanent to all societies irrespective of their mode of production and forms of goverment. In other words, the 'multitude' is a continuous and emergent principle of democratic diversity and negation.

multiple subjectivities, modes of attention, culturally strategies, but not because technology is *ipso facto* democratic, but because the ideals of lomography enables some notional kind of collective control over the photographic apparatus. Lomography's expression of the 'multitude', then - open participation without extended training - identifies possible new forms of cultural production with a democracy of intersubjective participation. Accordingly, the LSI links this democracy to view of itself as a continually expanding cadre of snapshot-photographers who, collectively and individually, bring the forms, practices and subjectivities of the city 'into view'. Significantly, then, lomography's deflationary logic is harnessed to a wider cultural dynamic: the production of 'diffuse creativity' across cultural boundaries and competences.[210]

Lomography is one manifestation of the massive diffusion of cultural practices that have emerged since the mid-nineties, which owe nothing or little to the validations of the dominant symbolic economy of the artworld. This is the result not only of the diffusion of cheap forms of technology, but more importantly of the diffusion of cultural and critical competences outside of the confines and constraints of the artworld and the artmarket. Over the last twenty years thousands and thousands of occasional artists, some of who were once trained at art school and some of whom have learnt from those who trained there, continue to bring their symbolic skills and knowledge to bear on a wide range of activities that have no artworld institutional location or artworld exchange value. Most of these activities are temporal and have no life beyond their immediate conditions of production and display. Yet collectively these activities across many social locations and in many varied forms, represent an increasing reflexive awareness of representation and artistic content outside of the professional institutions of art and, as such, provide an informal culture of artistic production that 'non-artistic'

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[210] For a recent discussion of 'diffuse creativity', see Stephen Wright, 'Le dés-oeuvrement de l'art', *Mouvements*, (Les valeurs of de l'art: entre marché et institutions) No 17, septembre/octobre 2001

producers participate in and learn from. Indeed, knowledge of the way the critical categories of art production have been dispersed into non-artistic locations has been barely addressed in current theoretical writing. Lomography (along with, for instance, the vast growth of new 'home' music production) is representative of these subterranean changes within the political economy of culture.

This notion of the work of the 'multitude' as a deflationary ideological force, is also reflected in the more politically focused phenomenon of indymedia, or the Independent Media Center. Indeed, if the mass form of snapshot in lomography is harnessed to various strategies of political indirection, in indymedia the snapshot becomes the direct bearer of the notion of the counter-archive. Loosely linked to the current anti-globalization movement indymedia provides an on-line site for photographers, and in particular non-professional snapshot photographers, to post their images of events, activities, demonstrations that the dominant media do not cover, or cover perfunctorily or antagonistically. In this regard the site updates the many alternative news and picture agencies that developed in the 1980s. However, as a Web service, it obviously provides mass access and distribution in a way that the earlier organisations were unable to do, by offering an efficient means of pooling images and information. "Indymedia is a collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage. Indymedia is a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth". "The Independent Media Center is [an]... organization committed to using media production as a tool for promoting social and economic justice".[211] The language maybe slightly awkward and politically pragmatist, and the assumptions about truth-telling straight out of 1930s documentary positivism, but the contemporary implications for the photographic snapshot are clear enough: the snapshot is what links the agency of the 'multitude' to the production of truth and the real. In this way the

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[211] http://www.indymedia.org

Mass Observation tendencies of lomography are put on a more overt political counter-archival footing. In submitting your snapshots of demonstrations and public events to the site, you are not only providing a platform for 'other ways of telling', but establishing the cultural validity of what you do as part *of* the 'multitude'. In lomography and indymedia there are no professional or amateur photographers as such, but, rather, photographers who take part in a collective, non-hierachical productive process.

Yet the deflationary imperatives of the 'amateur' do play a significant part in the self-identity of such organizations as the LSI and indymedia. The attachment to a sense of the snapshot-photographer as unconstrained by any of the inhibitory professional notions of quality is crucial to the inclusive ideal of indymedia. The indymedia contributor is interpellated as the redoubt of low-tech, unschooled authenticity. Similarly, despite the central importance of the internet in distributing the content of the LSI project, lomographers celebrate the Lomo camera as an analogue technology, operating in the face of the centralizing cultural logic of the new digital technologies. "Digital reproduction is but the delusion of memory...come witness the fury of screw-up photography".[212] In this way the use of a cheap, ageing technology provides a democratic ethos for the avant-garde ideology of practised failure or incompetence. Lomography's democratic advocacy of the multitude over the singular is also the advocacy of the multitude as a space where mistakes are honoured and value is self-created. Failure, or rather, the deliberate avoidance of given or prevailing standards and criteria of high-cultural artistic success, is taken to be a virtue. On this basis, the snapshot photographers of the LSI and contemporary snapshots-artists share a familiar and compact ideology: that the critique of value through photography is an emancipation from cultural division and hierarchy. This ideology is very seductive and has driven so much avant-garde art and popular photographic practices during the 20th century. Today, however, it is not so much photography

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[212] http://www1.lomo.com/orbiz/DigiTrade/0001/index.html

as such that stands as a 'placeholder' for the critique of value, but the photographic snapshot in particular. That is, in a culture where photography has become inscribed within the canon of modern art, the snapshot's residual informality and cheapness is taken to be the primary generator of a 'diffuse creativity'. But with the 'multitude' of inclusivity and unburdened and productive failure, comes the unbridled 'multitude' of the same. In the world of the snapshot no image escapes its formal bond with all other snapshots. No image (ultimately) is better or worse than any other - to infinity. In this sense both lomography and much contemporary art provide a theory of counter-value in terms of the democratic *proliferation* of the same and the generic - although the impulses of one and the other are not exactly comparable. The art snapshot functions as a closing down or negation of aesthetic ideology in order to delimit notions of would-be real creativity, the lomographic snapshot etc, functions as a closing down or negation of aesthetic ideology in order to identify and expand notions of creativity within these limits. Nevertheless for both lomography and contemporary art the reproducibility and simplicity of the snapshot becomes the *sine qua non* of the democratization of form through mechanical reproduction. In these terms it might be said that the dream of the lomographer and the contemporary snapshot-artist is a world open to representation expanded to everyone, all the time. Indeed, by extension, at the heart of snapshot ideology is a utopian notion of the 'amateur' photographer as a reflexive artist-in-waiting.

In this regard the deflationary logic of the snapshot hides a genuine democratizing impulse, an impulse that continually reconfigures itself in art and culture as the return of the repressed. But under conditions where the critique of value is simply a placeholder for the critique of value, its function easily becomes self-positivizing. There is no intrinsic virtue in the contingent and miniature itself. There is no intrinsic virtue in resisting the idea of quality in art as internal complexity. There is no intrinsic virtue in mass reproducibility itself. (Interestingly one of the recurring heroic figures in lomography literature is

Herman Melville's nay-sayer, Bartleby: "I would prefer not to"). The snapshot, therefore, is always caught in a dilemma, whether allied to an anti-aesthetic inside the institutions of art, or to the dictates of some notion of mass cultural democracy. It is called on to disinvest the image of congealed aesthetic ideologies, but necessarily cannot escape its own limited naturalism as a critique of value. In this way the snapshot performs a spectral function within and outside contemporary art: it haunts the self-identity of aesthetic ideology without being able to provide a counter aesthetic of its own. But paradoxically, it is because it cannot establish a counter-aesthetic of its own that it is able to continue to provide a critique of aesthetic ideology.

Chapter 7: Two Models of Labour: Figurality and Non-Figurality in Recent Photography

An ambivalent relationship to authorship and creative skill has defined photography's very emergence and development as a medium since the 1840s. The fact of photography's mechanical reproducibility has made it difficult to place the photographer within traditional categories of expression and aesthetic facility, splitting photography, historically, between those who believe that this is what is important about photography, and therefore what distinguishes it from painting, and those who believe that photography represents a different, but comparable, order of creativity. Indeed, this reordering of the creative relationship between subject and machine is at the heart of the legal valorisation of photography in the middle of the 19th century. By defining the mechanical act of photography as the mediation of a *technique*, (rather than an inert form of copying) the state brought photography into line with the intellectual rights theory of bourgeois copyright law. Under the protection of this legislation the photographer shifts from being a craftsman without social rank (and therefore the placeholder of common property rights) to the status of an artist. The photographer is now free to appropriate the real in his or her own name, rather than pass his or her labour on as the objective outcome of an undifferentiated and anonymous process of reproduction. As such photography becomes the expression of a *subject*.[213] The representation of the real is only recognised in law if a photographer is shown to have produced a deliberative, intentional act. In this respect a fundamental transformation takes place in the representation of the

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[213] See Bernard Edelman, *Le Droit saisi par la photographie*, François Maspero, 1973. English translation, *Ownership of the Image: Elements for a Marxist Theory of the Law*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

labour of the photograph: the mechanical function of photography is subsumed under the autonomous will and mark of the creative subject, discarding and suppressing the radical social value of photography: its unprecedented technological equalization of the process of image-making. One of the consequences of this culturally in the late 19th and early 20th century is the subjectivisation and aestheticization of the photograph, as a generation of artists using photography seek to shed all vestiges of its commercial workshop character. The photograph is taken to be the result of the supervention of the photographer, the 'photographer's eye'.[214]

This drive to the aestheticization of photography out of the codification of the commodified subject in law has, in large part, formed the target for various attacks on aesthetic ideology in photography in the 20th century. Lewis Hine, Sergei Tretyakov, Walter Benjamin, Ed Ruscha, Allan Sekula, and photo-text conceptual art, for example, all represent various attempts at the de-aestheticization of the agency of the subject-creator of photography, in order to reidentify the labour of the photographer with the mechanization of the photographic apparatus. In this way a very different model of labour in photography has underwritten the dominant aesthetic model in law during this period. What the aesthetes feared and expunged - the photographer as mere, or able, technician - Hine *et al*, openly embrace and expand. Hine thought of himself first and foremost as an educationalist; Tretyakov and Benjamin, famously, of course, saw the revolutionary Soviet photographer as a producer; the early Ruscha and Sekula, in their respective ways, invoke the artist-as-photographer as a counter-archivist. All these positions have their origins in very

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214 All aestheticized theories of photography as art stem from the legal codification of the photographer as creator - although this legal codification does not in itself produce the ideology of aestheticization. Aesthetic ideology and concept of the modern, autonomous artistic subject, preexists this new legislation, and as such shapes the kind of artistic subject the law has in mind at the end of the 19th century.

different social spaces and ideological perspectives, but they all share a view of the photographic process as something that is irreducible to the subjectivity of the photographer. The photographer produces the image as the outcome of a number of decisions and judgements, but he or she does not *make* the picture. The picture is produced in and by the apparatus. In fact, the notion of the machine's 'labour' here is itself questionable, for the photograph is produced instantaneously. Unlike in painting or sculpture, there is no recourse to a process of judgement, revision and manipulation in the process of production. In this lies photography's radical historical novelty, and the basis of its political and critical appropriation since the beginning of the 20th century: the fact that it is able to compress the skills needed to render the depiction of the world into an instant and infinitely reproducible form.

Consequently, for the critics of the subjectivisation of photography, what distinguishes photography from the fabrications of art is its intrusive realism, its capacity to disclose the look of things in complex detail. In this regard, we might say that this mimetic function has the character of a trauma. Because photography has an indexical relationship to the thing depicted - because it is produced as a trace of the material world - it is a representation of the real before it is a figural intervention of the artist. This generates a disjunctive kind of embodied relationship between beholder and photograph. The beholder is confronted by the object as something that is recognisably part of their own experiential world, and not the fictive world of the artist. Many photographers and theorists have taken this indexical character of photography to represent the universal and unmediated truth of photography. The early history of photography is very much entranced by this belief. But what this position obviously confuses is truth with verisimilitude. In a reversal of the aesthetic position the apparatus comes to subsume the intentionality of the photographer, leaving the photograph as an object without a history and ironically, as a mechanical image divested of the machine which produced it. Photographic theory played out various versions of this division,

down to the 1970s and 1980s. Barthes's and Gombrich's notion of photography as a system without a code is a reworking of the theory of photography as a natural language in Talbot; and Eco's insistence on photography as internally encoded is a philosophical version of Stieglitz's notion of the essential figurality of photography. The first position tends to retain a view of photography as involving a resistance to the figurality of painting, the second sees photography as identical to the figurality of painting. In this respect, both positions are torn halves of a whole, and, as a consequence seriously misunderstand the peculiar or estranged status of photography. Photography is neither figural nor non-figural, neither an art nor a non-art: it is both, insofar as in appearing to be non-figural it makes other systems of representation appear *more* figured. Photography, therefore, has been able to stand in successfully as a 'proper' (truthful) system of representation given its convincing appearance as truth. In this regard, the critique of photography as a natural, universal language is correct. But, as a 'stand in' for the real, photography is also the best or only representation of the real we have. The trauma of photography then is crucial to photography's truth claims. Photography's apparent capacity to suspend the figural is the means by which claims for the real can be made. Which is very different from saying such a process is identifiable *with* the real. On this basis, Richard Shiff has called photography a form of catachresis: that which can be two things and yet remain neither.[215]

Treating photography as neither a 'proper' nor 'figural' system of truth-telling allows us, therefore, to avoid the sterile debates between art and the photographic document. In establishing photography as a form of catachresistic figurality is revealed to be as much a part of photography as painting. Yet for all the value of catachresis as a means of avoiding binary thinking, it does not resolve how we

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[215] Richard Shiff., 'Phototropism (Figuring the Proper)', *Studies in the History of Art*, No 20, 1989. See also, Steve Edward's The Machine's Dialogue', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol 3, No1 1990

theorize the labour immanent to the photograph. For when photography is taken to be figural, it also annuls what continues to escape the figurality of the photograph: its indexical, automatic, 'proper' function. As such, seeing photography simply as figural also annuls the radical notion of the photographer as a non-artist or technician. Thus, despite the importance of thinking photography catachrestically, the residual tensions between the 'non-figural' and the 'figural' are not easily removed, and therefore retain their critical significance for understanding how photography today mediates its recent history and its new institutional locations. For instance, although Allan Sekula accepts, like Shiff, that photography is a figured/non-figured language, he nevertheless sees the moment of photography's 'proper' relationship to the world as defining what is potentially destablizing about photography's artistic identity. By foregrounding the 'non-figural' content of the image in the form of a continuous archive, he subordinates his activity to the documentation of the world, not in the knowledge that he is telling the truth of the world, univocally, but in the belief that photography's indexicality has a privileged relationship to the process of truth-telling.

This is a debate, then, about how the interrelationship between labour and machine is represented, how hand and mind come to produce the functions of photography in the light of what is held to be photography's defining characteristics. In this respect, I want to look at what I see as two radically opposed models of labour in the photograph in contemporary art, which reflect on this fundamental tension between claims to figurality and non-figurality in photography. Firstly, I want to look at Jeff Wall's work, whose cinematographic photographs represent a paradigmatic refiguration of photography through painting; secondly, I want to look more generally at the exponential rise of the snapshot, which continues, in transformed ways, the radical anti-figural traditions of the photograph. In this sense, this essay is less a comparative study of two models than a discussion about the labour of the photographer in the epoch of the

global digitalization of the image and of culture.

Model 1) Pictorialism, figurality and aesthetic unity

Since the late 1970s, Jeff Wall has presented his staged, back-lit photographs as a dissolution of two dominant theoretical dualisms: the fundamental opposition between montage as the advanced form of photographic practice and pictorialism as its regressive other; and the opposition between photography as something 'taken' and painting as something 'made'.[216] In this, his work, notionally at least, follows the idea of photography as a form of catachresis. But in contrast to Sekula, Wall has chosen to advance the claims of figurality as against those of the non-figural. Both his 'naturalistic' landscapes and his staged images invoke or refer directly to the pictorial forms of early modernist or pre-modernist painting. Extant paintings provide a model of pictorial composition. But this self-conscious figurality is not a reinvention of an aestheticist model of photography. On the contrary, his pictorialism is subject to a process of internal disunity through either formal disfiguration (the use of the grotesque or enigmatic detail) or the fragmentary dispersal of figures and objects and the 'bending' or stretching of space. For example, in *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October, 1947* (1990), the perspective of the room is imbalanced, slightly skewed, just as our view of the scene is pushed to the rightside of the scene above the seated children watching the ventriloquist.[217] Moreover, the ungainly, dishevelled appearance of the ventriloquist's dummy and the fearful expressions on the face of the children conflict with the implied humour and happiness of the scene. This 'not quite making sense' within the pictorial space of the tradition of the 'painting of

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[216] By pictorialism, here I do not mean the painterly aestheticization of Stiegltiz and his followers, but rather the conventions of perspectival realism

[217] For an extended discussion of *A Ventriloquist* see, '"Always Elsewhere": An Introduction to the Art of Jeff Wall (*A Ventriloquist at a Birthday party in October, 1947*), Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton, *Jeff Wall*, The Museum Moderna Kunst, Vienna 2003

modern life', identifies this work and others by Wall as being indebted to Edouard Manet's paintings of the 1860s.[218] As in Manet, in Wall's photographs pictorial space is represented as internally inchoate or unsurveyable from a single viewpoint. But if Wall is not reinventing aestheticist photography neither is he reviving Manet's modernism. Wall chooses to produce figurally complex photographs and not figurally complex paintings. This is because, for Wall, it is only photography that is now able to sustain the programme of what was once called realism. Any reinscription of disunity in Manet, therefore, can only be mediated by the very crisis of the 'painting of everyday life' itself. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Wall's choice of photographic pictorialism is also mediated by what he sees as the crisis of the post-conceptual critique of pictorialism.[219] What he perceives as the limitations of the post-conceptual turn against pictorial representation is the basis for his mediated turn to pictorialism and Manet. Thus, although Wall's tropes of disunity are built from this critique of pictorialism, this critique has at the same time, he claims, led to the dissolution of the realist and public functions of early modernism. Post-conceptual practice may have opened up the cultural frame of art, but it has also entrenched conservative anti-representational prejudices - hence the reclamation of Manet's as a significant critical (allegorical) force. Manet's modernism is the point where modernism in realism is won and lost, as modernism passes into abstraction. On this basis, Wall's photography is an attempt to produce another modernist dialectic: the reintegration of a modern aesthetic of disunity and fragmentation (or montage) *within* the pictorial space of a 'painting of everyday' life, as a means of refiguring the closures of both positions. The prospect of aesthetic unity and the impossibility of such a unity as a modern problem of picture making is made

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[218] See, Jeff Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet, *Parachute*, no 35, Montreal, June/July/August 1984

[219] Jeff Wall, '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects o f Photography In, Or As, Conceptual Art, in Anne Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds), *Reconsidering the Object of Art:1965-1975*, MIT, 1996

conspicuous *in* the making of photographs - the new modern medium *par excellence* of the 'painting of everyday life'. Wall, therefore, gives new form to an old question: in what ways is it possible to produce coherent representations of the everyday that also figure the fragmentation and alienation of capitalist social relations?

As a result, in combining painting with 'theatre' from within the framework of a cinematographic photography, Wall pursues a very different set of ambitions for photography than customarily associated with post-conceptual art: the photograph becomes the complex site of a painterly, staged figurality. Many photographers in the 19th century and 20th century made photographs *as if* they were producing paintings, but this was largely governed by photography's insecurity in the face of painting's institutional prominence. Today, this insecurity has been dissolved, even reversed. As such, Wall is not producing a cinematographic photography in order to upgrade the status of photography as against painting, but rather in order to defend the preeminence of photography as a form of complex figurality which possesses a *comparable* status to that of painting. In this sense, for Wall the defence of the figurality of photography is about the terms under which the status of photography is to be secured. Thus, although the critical status of photography has been validated institutionally since the 1960s, for Wall it has been validated in ways that have *underdeveloped* the labour of the photographer. Despite post-conceptual photography's deflation of cultural hierarchies, invocation of the everyday and critique of photography as a universal language, its material base has, according to Wall, been cognitively thin: that is, through identifying the critical form of photography with the non-figural content of the snapshot (with or without text) this work was unable to open out the embodied subjectivity of the photographer.

In breaking with conceptual art, then, Wall broke first and foremost with the inability or unwillingness of an earlier generation to break with the *limited*

concept of productive labour enshrined in the conceptual document. In adopting a deskilled category of art through the use of the serial snapshot, the possibility of the photograph as the site of internal complexity was diminished or evacuated. This move, of course, had much to do with the overwhelming desire on the part of these artists to forge a new set of artistic relations and formal strategies that owed nothing to inherited high cultural pathways and the elitist baggage of painting. But the genres of painting continued to form an unconscious residue within this work, a repository of unacknowledged figural traces. What Wall has pursued, in this respect, in his break with the post-conceptual document, is the reassertion of the cultural legacy of painting within an expanded and multimedia modernism, turning these historical traces and cultural preconditions into a concrete aesthetic programme. He has pursued this, however, not in order to reinstate the *primacy* of pictorial art, but in order to develop a model of labour in photography which could be compared, in its productive complexity, to the figurality of painting and the *mis-en-scène* of film. Accordingly, in order to make the kinds of pictures he wanted, Wall had paradoxically to reinscribe photography within the modern relations of production. Although the modernity of the photodocument in conceptual art was disruptive of the canon and aesthetic ideology, its actual mode of production was largely small scale and artisanal. In fact conceptual photography was driven by the actual disidentification of itself as photography, in order to separate itself from what it held to be the conservative professionalism of fine art photography. Repositioning the genre of the 'painting of everyday life', then, within a 'cinematic' mode of photography, was a way for Wall both to open out the subjectivity of the photographer beyond his or her role of 'objective' witness and ascetic bearer of the critique of the commodity, and to expand the social relations of the artists through collaboration. In this way, the mediation of painting within a cinematic framework was an attempt to resocialise the mode of production of art in a period when a domesticity of production was the principal guarantor of radicality (although Wall retains the identity of sole author).

Many artists have taken this route after Wall, but Wall's work remains significant given its self-conscious theoretical position within this transformed, technological and material space of art. By this I mean that the emphasis on the prephotographic production of the photograph (the building of sets, finding of sites, hiring of actors, extras, etc) and on post-production labour at the computer, embeds Wall's work in an expanded conception of the time of the photograph's production and reception. By employing the panoramic, by installing complex internal relations between depicted figures, and by emphasizing the staged or contingent detail, Wall's large-scale cibachrome lightboxes generate on the part of the beholder an unsettling and inquisitive mode of attention. Such an experience, however, isn't simply about the slowing down of perception. For this is exactly what conceptual art set out to achieve through the serial use of the photodocument and text. Rather, the use of an integrated pictorialism encourages a form of *empathetic* attentiveness; and it is this experience of the empathetic that gets dropped not only out of post-war modernism and conceptual and post-conceptual art, but also out of French modernism after Manet - that is, the notion of the beholder as the imaginative reconstructor of the depicted human interrelations and objects of a scene. Traditional forms of pictorial art do not in themselves secure this. But what they can do is integrate the processes of cognition within a determinate framework, allowing the eye to flow or circulate through the picture. Looking is driven not just by a process of discontinuous pattern making, but by the logic of causal detection. Hence by placing photography within a constructed model of labour the image is able to embed details and relations in story-telling form in ways that the photodocument is less able to do.

Model 2) The snapshot, deflation, and creative diffusion

Wall's model of labour has become very successful and has been much imitated

(if not his disruption of the viewing field of the spectator). This is because it brings modern photographic image-making in alignment with the contemporary conditions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. That is, it brings photography into alignment with the available resources and technical skills of the late capitalist technological sensorium. In this respect, Wall's move against conceptual photography in the late seventies was based, paradoxically, on what he perceived as its contribution to the stultification of photography's non-figurality. But Wall's and others artists' attempt to return subjective control over the photographic image, to reinvest the hand of the artist in the extensive, prephotographic labour of fabricating and directing, has brought with it its own difficulties. With the emphasis on prephotographic production, the motility and spontaneity of photography is suppressed. If this, of course, is exactly what this kind of photography wants and demands (on a non-dualistic basis), this does not mean that its effects are any less problematic. For what has accompanied the extensive institutionalization of this generation of a constructed figural photography, is the complacent ease with which the major institutions have celebrated this approach to photography as a form of prestidigitation which is able to take the place of painting.[220] The non-figurality of photography is again suppressed in the name of the category art. This is why, at the point where the new figural photography has achieved a huge amount of institutional success (Wall, Sherman, Gursky, Demand), there has been recently a strong non-figural counter move against this model of photography. In this respect, this work reasserts a model of labour in the photograph that is openly opposed to that of the prephotographic model of production. In turning to the tradition of the snapshot, it recovers and reinscribes the non-figural 'ordinariness' of the photodocument. Indeed, this model of production wholly rejects the centripetal ambitions of the new figural photography. In discarding the notion of the photograph as a space for panoramic image building, it reemphasizes the uncomposed and domestic qualities of the

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[220] See for example, Peter Galassi, 'Gursky's World', *Andreas Gursky*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2001

snapshot. The small-scale, the contingent and serial or composite display are its defining characteristics - a reprise of the informal aesthetics of the late 1960s. As such, in contrast to the notion of the photographer as director, this photography also reasserts the photographer as technician and archivist. But if this returns photography to its 'proper' pole of attraction, this work does not fit so easily into the category of critical documentary or into Sekula's notion of the political archive. For what drives this work is a radical deskilling and deflation of art, that puts it at odds not only with the prephotographic model of labour but also with the tradition of documentary practice. This is because the return to the non-figural content of the photograph in the form of the snapshot is not only delivered as a critique of photography-as-painting, but as a critique of the institutional assimilation of photography into art itself.

Aesthetic ideology today is no longer confined to a defence of the artisanal arts of painting. With the technological transformation and institutional ascendancy of photography, aesthetic ideology is now embedded within the advanced technological relations of art. The result is that strategies of anti-aestheticism that define art's autonomy are no longer based on the institutional domination of painting, but on the institutional dominance of photography. As photography is assimilated into the category of art, it is unable to adopt the usual avant-garde deaestheticizing strategies: the appropriation of the non-art or non-figural character of documentary photography as a way of removing art from the institutional power of the aesthetizing beholder. For, with the general incorporation of photography into the category of art, documentary practice has itself now become subject to the massive photographic and filmic transformation of the conditions of artistic production and reception. The photographic document as a source of illicit or transgressive non-figural content has been incorporated into the expanded category of art (for example, Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham, Boris Mikhailov). The outcome is that the negation of aesthetic ideology can no longer be performed so easily in the defence of photography, as it was for almost

fifty years from the early avant-gardes up to conceptual art. This essentially, is the basis of Wall's split with conceptual art. Thus, a division has opened up between photography and the institutions of art, forcing the hand of a generation: is it possible to defend the non-figural content of photography as a critique of aesthetic ideology, or should the photographer identify photography's critical function with the figural, accepting the inevitable assimilated aestheticized status of photography? Most artist-photographers (such as Wall) took the latter option because, they saw the alternative - the artist-technician - as too self-limiting and instrumental.

There would seem to be little space left, therefore, in which photography can proclaim its non-figurality as a critique of aesthetic ideology without appearing to advance the redundant argument about the immanent radicality of photography, given that photography is now thoroughly enmeshed in the post-1960s expanded field of art. Hence, the critical status of the snapshot today is wholly unprecedented. Its deflationary logic is now framed and mediated by the institutionalization of photography. This is why there is a radical reversal of the prephotographic model of labour in this new snapshot photography. In reclaiming the domestic, noncompositional and contingent, the new snapshot reinvests photography with a non-professional ethos borrowed from Conceptual art and (to a lesser extent) workers' photography of the 1930s. This move takes two forms, or the two forms that interest me here: the notion of the photographer as part of a group or collective (in the spirit of Mass Observation) and the idea of the photographer as diarist of his or her domestic circumstances or social milieu. The former is perhaps best represented by the extraordinary rise of the 'non-artist' group the Lomographic Society International (as discussed in the Chapter 6) and the latter by the artist Nobuyoshi Araki, who presents his gridded domestic snapshots on the gallery wall as testimony to the break down of the distinction between artist and non-artist in the realm of popular technology. Thus, although a global organization such as the Lomography Society International produces work

in cultural contexts outside of the official or unofficial channels of the artworld, these photographic practices demonstrate a shared set of assumptions and ideals. The diffuse creativity of the snapshot is seen as as a means of evading constrictive professional decision-making processes and criteria of conventional artistic value. By relying on the spontaneity, intimacy and mobility of the instamatic camera, the unmanipulated snapshot is taken to be inherently democratic. In this way, the deflationary logic of the snapshot represents a model of labour in the photograph which draws emphatically on the small camera as a compact, flexible, non-hierarchical technology. This, in turn, is why these deflationary moves are not to be found in work which is of the same stature as that of Wall and Gursky. Rather, this model of labour is about a resistance to such ambitions, in the name of cultural access, collective participation and the transformed identity of the artist .

Such a notion of deskilling through photography in 20th century art has been associated invariably with cultural democracy from below. In this, Lomography is no different. But if the group's decision to organize its activity on a collective archival basis is a political decision, its ideology of participation is not structured through any explicit political agendas (as in Mass Observation). Participation is not determined on the basis of an activist programme, but, as discussed, through a series of 'conceptual' guidelines or 'shooting scripts' prepared by the Lomographic organisers (photographing 'blindfolded', photographing in one particular location or things of a particular shape or colour, etc). Participants not only have to use the Lomo Kompakt camera but follow these guidelines to the letter. In these terms the turn to the non-figural content of the snapshot is itself figured through the category of art (through various conceptual strategies of creative self-limitation). This attaches another level of meaning to the figural/non-figural tensions I have been exploring. The turn to the non-figurality of the snapshot as a critique of artistic hierarchy, the high-cultural artist, photography-as-painting, is itself subject here to the reflexive strategies of post-

conceptual art. Lomographers may see themselves as non-professionals, but they also see themselves as 'non-artist artists'. Thus, this isn't a case of non-artists attacking art in the name of the non-figurality of photography (as was the case in the early avant-garde) but of non-artists defining an art in their own interests through photography. This reflects a wider set of cultural transformations since the mid-1990s: the massive diffusion of cultural and critical competences that owe nothing to the symbolic validation of the artworld and the market. Non-artist artists produce photographs in the name of an expanded category of art without seeking the approval of the institutions of art. The history of 20th century photography, of course, is the history of these ambitions for the non-artist. Benjamin's and Tretyakov's model of the author as producer is based on exactly these principles. But with the reinstitutionalization of photography as a figural practice, these (fragile) links between the non-artist and artist under the mantle of cultural access have been largely deposed or marginalized. Lomography's defence of the snapshot as the site of a diffuse, reflective creativity (albeit depoliticized into the realm of the festive) revives this model. Similarly, by bringing 'ordinary' modes of attention and display into the orbit of the gallery, Araki's home snapshots blur the boundary between professional artist and non-professional artist. That is, the 'ordinary', non-artistic modes of attention of the snapshot (the family album, for instance) are seen as a legitimate site of artistic reflection. By subjecting the intimate character of the domestic snapshot to serial repetition the spontaneous qualities of amateur photography are drawn into a cinematic frame of exposition and story-telling.

Figurality, Non-Figurality and Value

The deflationary model and the prephotographic model of labour represent, essentially, competing models of value. The prephotographic model insists that if photography is not to submit to the false democracy of mechanical reproduction or to the wider deskilling and nihilism immanent to the commodity form, it must

transform photography in the image of high-artistic ambition. The deflationary model, in contrast, insists that photography and art do not need to pursue these ambitions to secure their cultural identity, but need, rather, to recognise that photography's spontaneity, mobility and essential cheapness can be the basis of another, socially expansive model of artistic labour: the democratic inclusion of the non-artist into the production of the image. As such, this opposition returns us to an older cultural debate between the claims of aesthetic integration as a defence of aesthetic value and the notion of aesthetic dispersal and diffusion as a defence of democratic access to shared artistic skills. For Wall, the deflationary model cannot sustain a theory of value; for Lomographers and post-conceptual defenders of the snapshot, the prephotographic model confuses value with the rehierarchisation of art. These positions are at one level incommensurable; and as such represent the formalization of the catachrestic content of photography. Consequently, it is foolish to talk about one or other of these models of labour as progressive. The deflationary photographers are right about the prephotographic photographers and the prephotographic photographers are right about the deflationary photographers. The critical issue isn't about asserting one model over the other, as if the cultural and social divisions which produce this split at the level of the sign can be resolved at the level of artistic practices. Rather, the critical issue lies in seeing the split in photography between the figural and non-figural as a productive source of different kinds of critical work - but with two important qualifications. Firstly, the prephotographic model of labour annuls itself when it bases its value on the suppression of non-figurality in photograph, because it is exactly the non-figurality of photography that renders photography's claims to the real as different from any other system of representation. And secondly, the defence of non-figurality as truth is always breaking down in the face of the assimilation of photography into art and the figural. The outcome of this is that the truth-claims of the non-figural and figural are *both* allegorical; however, the truth-claims of the figural could not exist without the prior claims of the non-figural. In this way, photography always leads us back to the trauma of

the real. This is the *value* of the non-figural.

Chapter 8: Photography and the Social Production of Space

In *The Production of Space* (1974) Henri Lefebvre divides his analysis of space into three distinct categories: spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces.[221] Spatial practices refer to the links between the routines of everyday life and the use and occupation of the various networks, sites and routes which make up the public and private, productive and non-productive, spaces of a given social formation. Representations of space refer directly to the 'logic of capital': the production and reproduction of the built environment determined by the state and market. And, representational spaces refers to those spaces created, adapted or imagined by people either domestically or publicly, which are derived symbolically from the practices of art and counter-cultural modes. These might be, ambitiously, the taking over a disused site for community ends, or simply, the transformation of a teenager's bedroom into a fantasy space. Unsurprisingly the utopian content of these representational spaces - what Lefebvre calls space as *work* rather than commodity - forms the basis of his critique of the routinized character of daily spatial practice and the corporate character of the representations of space of planners, developers, architects and technocrats. Yet, if Lefebvre identifies representational spaces as involving a stake in a different kind of future, he is also quick to point out how weak and attenuated the collective and social function of such representational spaces actually are. Representational spaces may define the limits of the exteriority of corporate space, but they are nevertheless subordinate to capital. They may contribute to representations of space - that is, be allowed to humanize or gentrify various urban areas, figure imaginatively in the projects of architects, or in the fantasies of the tourist industry - but as the basis for any systematic confrontation

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[221] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, [1974] translated by Donald Nicholoson-Smith, Basil Blackwell 1991

with dominant property relations their productiveness remains largely symbolic.

Lefebvre refers to the increasing dominance of representations of space as a process of social abstraction. The production of space is not a backdrop to the division of labour, the reproduction of the relations of production and the accumulation of capital, it is integrated into, and productive of, its monopolistic dynamic.

This was Lefebvre's great theoretical advance in the analysis of space: space is not just what capital occupies, but what capital *produces, reproduces and transforms*. However, Lefebvre's discussion of this dynamic was written before current debates on globalization and is confined predominantly to a discussion of abstraction in terms of a cultural analysis of the phenomenological and somatic experience of space. This has fed into less compelling contemporary anthropological theories of spatial abstraction, such as Marc Augé's work on airports, supermarkets and motorways.[222] What is missing from Lefebvre (and more significantly from Augé) is a strong sense that the abstractions of the world market, of what Augé calls supermodernity, are directly given in the concept of capital itself. Globalization, monopolization and abstraction *are* the logic of capital and as such the production of space is the perpetual outcome of the dynamic of accumulation and devaluation. This basic conflict is discussed in Lefebvre principally at the abstract level of the dynamic interrelation of totality and fragmentation and not in terms, for instance, of the distinction between fixed capital and productive capital. The production of space under capitalism relies on fixed capital (factories, offices, etc) embedded in specific landscapes in order to realize the productive value of labour. But because capitalism requires a constant reduction in production costs and the time of movement of goods, fixed capital

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[222] Marc Augé, *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, [1992] translated by John Howe, Verso 1995

becomes, to quote David Harvey, "the barrier to overcome".[223] Hence new social geographies are constantly being produced at considerable cost to capital (the result of the general devaluation which occurs during the crisis of the realization of value) and, sometimes, at massive human cost. In this regard the continuous restructuring of spatial configurations through the crisis in the realization of value is the normal day-to-day dynamic of capitalist development. Accumulation and devaluation constitute the productive logic of spatial abstraction (and its countervailing representational and cultural forces). But the more capitalism develops the more it faces geographical inertia. The circulation of capital becomes imprisoned in fixed infrastructures. Which is why the more these forces of geographical inertia prevail the more aggressive the spatial 'switching' solutions to the crisis of accumulation become - the rapid localized devaluation of capital in one area as one corporation pulls out, and the rapid localized expansion of value in another area as the same corporation moves in.

The transformation of major metropolitan centres such as New York, London, Berlin and Barcelona, into predominantly non-productive, banking, tourist and administrative centres, the rapid growth of abstract space from out of town mega-stores to the ubiquity of McDonalds and Starbucks, the rapid 'switching' of production from one area to another more favourable area, the growth of so-called 'non-spaces' such as airports and motorways, have become the familiar topos of the new globalization. As such, it is not hard to see the connection between the sharpening of these forces on the production and control of space, and the huge expansion in the production of 'imaginary spaces' and the politics of space in contemporary art, and in the emergence of the documentation of the new 'representations of space' of postmodern urbanization. The violence, sublimity, ugliness, and inertia of spatial abstraction have become the explicit cultural background to, and conceptual ground, of a number of recent photographic projects.

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[223] David Harvey, *The Limits To Capital*, Basil Blackwell, 1982, p403

The most obvious and ambitious of these, of course, is Andreas Gursky. Gursky's large-scale chromogenic colour prints survey the forms of production, patterns of consumption, architecture and design of the new social geographies. In this his panoramas operate synecdochically as a synthetic visualization of globalized mass culture.[224] By focusing on the commodity in its vast extensity, and on the uniformities of mass - individualised - consumption, the repetition of things and people *stand in* for totalization, for the global extensity of the market and the forces of the new modernity. The outcome is a photography that invokes the forces of spatial abstraction as much as documenting its forms. By adopting a topographical format, the effects of spatial abstraction in the public domain - reproducibility of the same, non-relationality, the emptying of historical consciousness - take on the phenomenological boundaries of the imaginary spectator of the scene: "this is what it is like to be in this place, at this time, and as such, by extension, this is what it is like to live in this world of things and relations now". Photography, of course, is no stranger to these empathetic effects of scale of the view-camera photograph - think of the New Topographics in the 1970s -but in Gursky's case the computer manipulations lend an unprecedented illusionism to the surface of the represented scene, heightening the spectator's imaginary sense of absorption.The force of this lies in the fact that the panoramic presence of the photograph appears to reproduce the sublimity and dread of the new abstract social geographies aggressive extensity, radically unsettling the domesticated conventions of the documentary photograph as an abbreviated description or notation of some part of the world. Gursky's photographs are not 'enlarged snapshots', but the deliberate and composite (edited) result of extended study of a given range of typical settings and scenes. Gursky's photographs, then, ask significant epistemological questions about the representation and production

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[224] All photographs operate synecdochically of course. The synecdoche is not a special property of some pictures. However, some pictures, particular large-scale panoramic photographs that establish a strong connection between their internal relations and the extensity of these relations in space, *invite* a synecdochical reading.

of space in the contemporary photograph as much of the category of photography itself. It is as if the extensity of abstract space in late capitalism has forced photography to find new technical and cognitive resources to contain its effects.

But if the attempt to contain the logic of spatial abstraction *in* the photograph, represents a significant challenge to the domestication of photography, the use of the 'domesticated' conventions of photography are no less evident in other contemporary photography which addresses the effects of spatial abstraction. Indeed, Gursky's photography is, perhaps, the current exception to the rule, in that the representation of the representations of space in this latter kind of work is generated in the studio and through what continues to be the dominant mode of photographic practice: the staged image.

Reliant on the conventions of the scene constructed for the camera in the studio, the effects of spatial abstraction in this work are figured metonymically through the interior or exterior detail, rather than synecdochically through the panoramic sweep of the fixed-view camera. For example, in the photographs of James Casebere, Thomas Demand and Jorge Ribalta the staged architectural interior or exterior produces a deliberately muted or anonymous space, in which the non-relational effects of spatial abstraction are suggested either in abstentia, through a lack of external reference points, or through a kind of sinister constraint. But what marks out the non-relationality of these photographs, is not their oblique invocation of the 'poetics' of space, but their discrete or miniaturized conditions of production: all the photographs are produced from *models*. Casebere's Gothic crypt-like interiors, Demand's bland, anonymous residential interiors, and Ribalta's graffitied, derelict exteriors are all photographed from small architectural sets made from painted cardboard, paper or wood. Furthermore, the referential chain does not stop at the model. In Demand and Ribalta the sets are themselves produced from photographs: respectively, grainy newsphotos (of significant historical or newsworthy sites such the corridor to Jeffrey Dahmer's

apartment), and snapshots of the old Barrio Chino in Barcelona. An ambiguous chain of verisimilitude is established, based on the passage of the object into a photograph and, then, into an object resembling the referent of the original photograph and, then, back into another photograph.

This production of sets by the artist-photographer is commonplace enough, and since the early 1970s with the advent of the staged self-image, has played perhaps the key role in figuring the crisis of representation: the fact that representations never seem to match up to their referents. But, this overfamiliar issue of photography's "incommensurability problem"[225] is not the central concern here, and as such the interpretation of these spaces is not simply a question of a semiotic reading of the would-be gap between representation and its referents. Rather, what is at stake here is how photography might interrogate the production of space.

If there is an overarching assertiveness to Gursky's panoramic invocation of spatial abstraction, in the work of Casebere, Demand and Ribalta their 'stilling' of space is used counterwise, to produce a sense of intimacy and loss. This captures a very different set of responses to the effects of spatial abstraction. The photographs neither set out to replicate the surface appearance of the corporate abstractions of the contemporary world, nor do they, in their turn to illusionism, concern themselves with producing fantasy spaces. Rather, they are simulated naturalistic spaces in which the effects of abstraction are produced *fictively* . In this they sit somewhere between the representation of the representations of spaces and representational spaces. Or rather they integrate these positions.

What is useful, first and foremost, about Lefebvre's work on the production of space is that it is grounded in discussion of space as a problem of power - of

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[225] Richard Shiff, 'Realism of Low Resolution: Digitisation and Modern Painting', in Terry Smith (ed) *Impossible Presence*, Sydney/Chicago University Press 1999

access, autonomy and relationality - and not as a hermeneutics or a poetics. The distinction he makes between representations of space and representational space is, essentially, about distinguishing between qualitatively different kinds of appropriation and control: appropriation and control in the interests of the forces of repetition and reproducibility, and appropriation and control in the interests of difference and relationality. In this way, for Lefebvre space is always an issue of who occupies or uses it, under what terms, and to what ends? On this score Casebere's, Demand's and Ribalta's are *deceptively* vacant: the implied connection between the setting and absent orders of power (of abstraction) invoke these places as spaces where certain (symptomatic or reified) experiences are produced and reproduced. These spaces maybe empty but they are nonetheless *occupied.* But what is significant about these 'dead spaces', is not that we can speak of them in terms of 'power' rather than 'poetics'(one does not necessarily exclude the other), but how the representation of spatial abstraction and representational space interconnect, and consequently, how space is produced in the photograph. What is distinctive, even perverse, about these photographs is that a complex process of fictionality is given over to the mimetic reproduction of the banal and nondescript. It is as if these artists are caught between two forces: the direct, objective need to submit to photography's powers of mechanical reproducibility (as the means by which the effects of spatial abstraction are made sensible to a modern audience), but at the same time, the need to insert their hand-based presence in the photograph and, as such, their need to assert an imaginary control over this process, as a critique of non-relationality. It is as if the utopian or negative content of representational space returns through the representation of the representations of space. The result is that, paradoxically, these images are *highly crafted* photographs of the effects of spatial abstraction. This is particularly resonant in Ribalta's photographs of the Barrio Chino, where the elaborate effort gone into replicating the look of the old working class area prior to its recent 'modernization' functions metonymically as an identification with the area's displaced labour. A symbolic link is established between the

labour invested by the artist in the reproduction of the dilapidated appearance of the Barrio, and the clearance of the area as a place of artisanal production. An area that once had a rich and variegated history is now designated as unproductive. Capital hates unproductive spaces and will do its best to transform them on the grounds that modernization is a technical requirement and moral necessity. In this sense these spaces are at the other end of Gursky's vision of globalization. These are images *of* devaluation.

Of course the notion of saving photography from a would-be deadening rationalism by recognising and releasing the intentional and creative presence of the photographer has long characterised the contested status of photography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The determining role of the photographer's hand has been repeatedly introduced into the discourses of photography to save photography from the 'merely mechnical' and inexpressive. But something different is emergent here. These are images in which the indexical powers of photography and the artist's productive manipulation of materials are evidently fused: in the case of Gursky, through the digital remastering of the photograph, and in the case of Casebere, Demand and Ribalta through the material and painterly construction of the pre-photographic referent. Making and reproduction *converge* without a sense that photography needs to be defended as less 'creative' than painting. In other words, although model-building for the camera is quite a different matter from the internal reordering of the photographic image, in both instances the means by which the photograph is arrived at possesses no less a complex figurality than painting. On this basis it is possible to see this convergence of making and reproduction as reflecting something more substantive: the extent to which photography now is held to have actually taken *over* the figural complexities of painting. Now, this a contentious claim, and a claim that is easily appropriated towards conservative ends, as is witnessed in the recent reception of Andreas Gursky. Indeed, the eagerness with which the new figural content of photograph has been promoted by the major art institutions,

such as the Museum of Modern Art, is not surprising, given the need on the part of such institutions to locate photography within the confines of aesthetic ideology. Despite the institutional emergence of avant-garde photography in the late1970s, the institutions have long felt uncomfortable about photography's destablization of traditional notions of authorship and the category of 'art'. What makes photography so interruptive of aesthetic ideology *is* its mechanical reproducibility. Or rather what makes photography so destablizing is that it is neither figural nor non-figural, neither properly art, nor properly objective. But the location of photography within conservative ideologies of auteurship is not what concerns me here. What is engaging about this work is not its straining after some putative aesthetic status, but how photography's social claims have now passed *into* the figural complexities of form. There is no fretting and worrying on the part of these photographers that figurality might constitutes a loss of referentiality, although Casebere's work is clearly, historically, a product of such a moment in early critical postmodernism. On the contrary, model making, staging and computer manipulation, function apodictically as the means by which photography is able to go about its job. Figurality in photography is not a retreat from the 'real', but produces a rupture or intervention into the real through the sensuous organization of form.

My wider argument, therefore, is that this turn to the figural in the representation of space is a response to two sets of mimetic demands relating to the dominant forces of abstraction on photography's social and imaginary claims at the beginning of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the requirement to *encompass* or *invoke* the subliminal effects of abstract space, and not just point to these effects, and on the other, the need to reproduce and confront these effects through some counter-imaginary control over space. Snaphot and documentary modes are unable to do this, or do it in such as way as to render the abstractions as ambiguously homely and unalienated. In contrast, in order to denaturalize space, the new resources of figurality in photography employ either an ecstatic

exaggeration of form (as in Gursky) or a seductive illusionism (as in Casebere, Demand, and Ribalta). By producing an aberrant naturalism, a self-consciously fictive naturalism, the representation of abstract space in this work is made *unhomely*.

Chapter 9:Trauma, ostension and the photographic document

In this chapter I want to look at what remains intractable, invasive and unassimilable about photography, or more precisely, about the naturalistic photographic document. This will mean addressing what I take to be the truth *content* of the photograph, rather than simply photography's avowed veridical truthfulness as a medium, although the latter is no less significant for my argument.

By truth-content I mean the singular and distinguishing capacity of photography to 'bring something into view'. This characterization is simplistic, banal even, but it conceals what is surprisingly rarely remarked on in contemporary photographic theory: the fact that the photographer 'points at things' and in pointing at things 'picks things out'.

Pointing and picking out are essentially active, cognitive categories. That is, they operate on the basis of seeking, discriminating, categorizing.The obvious cognates of 'pointing to' and 'picking out' are 'surveying' 'pursuing', 'finding one's way about'.

As such the meaning of a photograph is indivisible from the movement of the photographer through time and space, even if this movement is fragmentary or partially sedentary. Indeed, we talk about an accumulated range of photographs as an archive, a repository or laying down of temporal and spatial activities; we don't talk about an archive of sculptures.

The photographic document is evidence of movement through and in the world, into the world; the photographer guides his or her camera across, above, to, and

around his subject with the insatiability and compulsiveness of the explorer, detective, predator, impassioned lover. In this respect photography's claims on the indexical truth of a given moment is always governed by the position of the photograph within an imaginary continuity before and after the shutter closes. The photographer moves, and moves on, and moves on again, in order to find and repeat a moment of satisfactory stillness. And, significantly, this is the paradox of photography: at the point at which photography fixes the world of appearances, in an image of the truthfulness of those appearances, it is also the uncertain, discontinuous space of the photographer's will, desire, intentions. It is an 'I', a Cartesian eye, a restless accumulator of experience, a hub of hubris and frustration.

The metaphor of the photograph as an external act of invasion has been much used and analyzed in relation to the category of violence. Photography and violence against identity, the self, truth, are never that far apart it is argued. Indeed, for critics of photographic naturalism photography of the 'other' presupposes the violation of the 'other', all others; photography is held to be an unwarranted intrusion, an imposture, the work of white, male Western malfaisance even. This blasting of the effects of power through the portals of photographic humanism decentred the photographic 'I' and shattered its claims to free movement; the photographer was no longer able to speak so confidently from inside the space of naturalistic photography's good intentions. As such it gave pointing a point again, another point, other points, many points.

But if the photographic document is in a position to violate in the interests of power, this violation is not unidirectionally negative, for violation is always the precursor to the production of knowledge. That is, there is no knowledge without the interruption of identity, of breaking sense, of a confrontation between subject and subject, subject and object. Knowledge is inescapably a process of contamination and diremption. Accordingly, to 'point' and to 'pick out' cannot

but *be* violating, troubling in a productive way, for to 'point out' is to draw attention to something, and to draw attention to something or someone without the acknowledgement of the 'other' is an affront, an impertinence, because it threatens the boundaries of decorum and autonomy, of what should not be seen. In fact pointing becomes literally unbearable: Ben Shahn and Walker Evans, for instance, both used cameras with a false lens that allowed them to face in one direction whilst photographing their subject from another. But, irrespective of the dissembling stratagems of photographers, this is exactly what the photographic document invites: an affront to the self-image of others, a running ahead of the self-control of others, a space where the other can be seen as other to herself. In other words a space marked by justice, revelation, discovery. In this sense, 'pointing' and 'picking out', comes with responsibilities to the other, but these responsibilities can only be vestigially governed by a respect for the other. For if it is violation that produces knowledge, then it is the truth of violation that has to be honoured, even when this violation produces images that subvert or weaken the dignity and autonomy of the other.

The responsibility of the photographer is to be responsible to the truth of this conflict. The photographer must make a judgement, then, on the outcome of this, that is, decide on how far the results of his or her 'pointing to' and 'picking out' reveals truth (some truth, that is) or its opposite.

In this regard the photo document is a critically *ostensive* medium, it points at and picks out things because the photographer judges these things to be worth attending to. Indeed, this is what is so successful about ostensive communication: to point out, to point at, arouses high expectations of relevance. By pointing, or some other ostensive act, the communicator implies that her action is significant enough to be worth attending to by her interlocutor. In this the ostensive act focuses the intentions of the communicator, and therefore involves the

construction and presentation of conceptual representations.[226]

Photography's 'pointing to' as a means of 'picking out' is of this order; a making manifest of the thoughts of the photographer. But, of course, the meaning of the things picked out is never co-present with the act of taking the photograph. This is why the temporality of 'pointing' in the act of taking the photograph and the 'pointing' that takes place afterwards in the studio are divergent ("I prefer this one! This one is boring. This is one is too ambiguous."). 'Pointing at' and 'picking out' may be based on the best of intentions, so to speak, but this process is never self-evident once the shutter has closed. Pointing - *at this point* - is always inscribed within a retrodictive process of truth-telling. "My pointing at this seems better than my pointing at that". "Why did I point at that?"

This is why 'pointing at' in photography is blind to its own expectations. There is no stable correspondence between what gets 'picked out' and what is ultimately judged meaningful about what is picked out. This is evidence of the much invoked, and the much theorized notion - after Walter Benjamin - of the photograph as an unconscious optic: the idea that the photographer and her interpetators 'find' meaning in the photograph retrospectively. The discrepant gesture, the untoward detail, the unbidden strangeness of a sign bring the workings of the unconscious to the surface: those things that the photographer could not prevent entering into the frame of the photograph.

This process is undoubtedly what gives the photodocument its revelatory content, what shapes and motivates the spontaneity of 'pointing at' and 'picking out': the recovery of the thing, the detail which lies beyond my rational control. However, the notion of the law of latent disclosure seems a partial understanding of the function of 'pointing to' in photography. This model of disclosure does not touch

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[226] For a discussion of ostension and linguistic communication, see Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance*, Basil Blackwell, 1986

on the photographic act itself, that is, what is disruptive about the photodocument, how the truth of 'pointing at' and 'picking out' forms, and is embedded in, the representation of the refractory content of reality. Photography does not just bring back more than we know as discrete signs, it is in itself an act of interruption, a break in the continuum of alienated appearances. This is why in an important sense 'pointing' is also involved in a conscious process of secondary ostension, by pointing at one thing we may in fact be making clear that we are pointing at something else, relating one thing metonymically, synecdochically, to another thing. W. V.O. Quine talks about "deferred ostension".[227] A man points at an empty parked car covered in parking tickets and declares: "He'll be sorry when he gets back". That is, through pointing to a given state of affairs the man infers to another state of affairs.

Photography is unimaginable without this process of indirect ostension, indeed, the substitution of a declared ostensive meaning for an undeclared meaning is essential to the social and discursive claims of photography. The photographer/camera 'looks at' in order to look awry, look beyond, look elsewhere. Or rather in looking away after looking at, *we look* awry. Thus for instance, a photograph of a group of urban buildings might be taken as evidence of architectural interest, but, on the basis of our knowledge of the photographer's other work, the buildings might also might be taken as evidence of capital accumulation and the abstractions of space. 'Pointing to' as a form of 'picking out', then, is pointing as means of pointing otherwise, pointing contra wise on the basis of pregiven social categories and conceptual distinctions.

In respect of this notion of looking awry, of 'looking at' in order to begin looking elsewhere, we come into immediate contact with an aspect of 'pointing to' and the unconscious that is hardest to pin down in relation to photography, but is

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[227] W.V.O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University, 1969

nonetheless crucial to understanding photography's intractability: the experience of trauma.

Trauma is easily misunderstood. By trauma I do not simply mean the representation of a crisis, of a tragedy or injury, of the direct signs of pain and loss - a photography of atrocity or horror, so to speak - but trauma as an *affect* , something which is latent and invisible, a secondary manifestation of a prior event.

This distinction, of course, is first formulated in Freud's and Breuer's 'Preliminary Communication' on hysteria and trauma in 1893. For Freud and Breuer a precipitatory event does not act like an *agent provocateur* in releasing the traumatic symptom, but, rather, as they argue, the psychical trauma is the *memory* of the trauma. In other words, the recognition of trauma is the knowledge of imperturbable but invariably undisclosed reminiscences of the founding, disruptive event. "It acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work".[228] Trauma is transformed from its specific location in the nervous system and the somatic, into the operations of the symbolic. The trauma exists neither within the immediate recollection of an originary event or in the immediate recollection of physical symptoms, but in the memories of a memory (or rather) memories of the precipitatory event. Trauma is a wound that is hidden, or constantly being hidden, displaced, aestheticized.

This has implications in how we understand the unconscious and the act of 'pointing' and 'picking out' in photography.

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[228] Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, 'On the Psychical Mechanisms of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication' (1893), *Studies in Hysteria*, Penguin, 1974, p57

Essentially, the experience of trauma is the experience of language divided from being. Putting the experience of trauma into language in analysis the subject continually fails to achieve a sense of psychological restitution or assimilation in the face of his or her painful reminiscences. The memory of the memory of the trauma resists integration. The damage caused by the trauma is constantly occluded by the repetitive processes of aestheticization and dissociation.

This failure of assimilation is comparable to, or indicative of, the operations of the unconscious space of the photograph. The promise of pointing and the promise of knowledge and clarity, turns out to not to be the promise of objectivity, the 'proper' at all, but of the figural and the partial. In this way photography's drive to ostension, its ontology of 'bringing into view', is always marked by the failure to realise its desire for completion, transparency, totality. Yet the failure of knowledge, does not mean the failure of truth. For, simultaneously, the promise of pointing, of revelance, breaches this failure of objective knowledge and clarity by returning this failure to our critical gaze. That is, the processes of our looking shifts from what is being 'pointed to' as the promise of rational assimilation (the incorporation of the world of appearances into our systems of knowledge) to the actuality of what is being *pointed out*, the resistance to the process of assimilation through the secondary processes of ostension (the notion of the photograph as a secondary representation of a break or a fundamental 'wound' in reality). Trauma here, then lies, in the exorbitant power photography has in returning to our vision the unassimilable, rebarbative nature of reality as appearance. Indeed, Roland Barthes touches on this traumatic character of photography when he talks about the enigma of the photograph as something that "pricks me", something that pricks me out of my indolence and ideological state, so to speak, that *affects* me, that makes it difficult for me to assimilate my knowledge of the photograph's details within the photograph's own descriptive or generic terms. As he argues: the photograph "*fills the sight by*

force...because in it nothing can be refused or transformed".[229]

This sense of being 'pricked' relates to the way in which the photodocument is able to bring me into close proximity to the symptoms of appearances, the living contradictions of appearances. *This is the truth of photography*: its unrivalled capacity to reveal the traumatic world of appearances, the fact that what we see is not convergent with what we know to be true, and that what we know about what we see we are unable to freely assimilate.

Let us be clear here. Photography does not represent the traumatic event as if the traumatic event is some *thing* that is visible and knowable. Explicit in Freud and Breuer is the notion that we can never know what the trauma actually looks like, it is literally inaccessible to us as it is to the subject of the trauma, and therefore that we can only 'know' the trauma through its obscure symptoms. Rather, photography in 'pointing otherwise' in 'pointing to' points to the *traumatic symptom* (the gap between knowledge and being). This is why photography, through its ostensive function, is driven to mimic the repetitions, stasis, aestheticizations and dissociations of traumatic experience. In its movement into the world, in its 'pointing to' as a 'picking out', its drive to represent inhabits that compulsion to repeat which constitutes the gap between knowledge and being.

In this regard, the important point to be made here is that photography's relationship to the unconscious is not reducible to that of historical memory, of the traces of things past. Rather, photography, in the sense Jean Laplanche has characterized Freud's and Breuer's revolutionary notion of the unconscious as a foreign body, represents a kind of alien possession or disruption, the thing that calls us back to the alienness of the world, and our alienated place in it. In this sense, photography represents a refusal of reality, a refusal of the assimilation of

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[229] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Jonathan Cape 1982, p91

reality to its historicization as a document, at the same time as it makes a claim on the real. This is why the compulsive-repetitive nature of 'pointing', in order to find the point, to make a point, is characterisable as a kind of invasiveness, becoming a kind of decentring: the photograph decentres the consciousness of the spectator (and photographer), *through* the presence of the 'other', that is, through the presence of that which 'pricks' us.

Accordingly, this is very different from a model of the unconscious in which the photograph simply exhibits or discloses the effects of the unconscious as hidden signs of the repressed, in order that those hidden signs then might be reassimilated into the creativity of the photographer, the ego of the spectator and the miraculous realistic powers of the camera. This view presupposes that there is something that is split off from me and from photography, that I and photography can reclaim, make amenable. Thus from this perspective the effects of the unconscious are reinscribed into a descriptive economy of the photograph as evidence (of the infinity of nature, of times past), rather than as a means by which my 'looking awry', my looking otherwise, becomes a recognition of the failure of 'pointing to' as the promise of another truth.

Photography, I would argue, then, is an alien body, an alien thing, precisely because its compulsive powers of ostension makes it difficult for the act of 'pointing to' to settle down into the figural and the aesthetic, despite the repeated attempts to turn photography into a figural art. Photography always rebounds as an *affect*, as the memory of the unassimilable thing that the concept of trauma invokes. Photography disrupts us, moves us into a space of disequilibrium. As Laplanche puts this, in his writing on the decentring function of the unconscious: "Internal alien-ness [is] maintained, held in place by external-alien-ness; external alien-ness, in turn, [is] held in place by the enigmatic relation of the other to his own internal alien".[230] Photography participates in this logic, insofar as

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[230] Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, Routledge, 1999, p80

photographer, photograph, viewer and the material world exist in a discontinuous and codeterminate set of relations.

Where does the truth of photography lie then? It lies in this circle of ostensive attention. By 'pointing to' as a means 'picking out' as a way of 'pricking' us, photography inscribes the representation of real into a system of shock effects, disruptions to the equilibrium of the ego as the bastion of aesthetic ideology. In other words, photography possesses an alterity or otherness, that is, is unable to assimilate itself to dominant aesthetic categories because of its inability to hide its relationship to the alienated and material substrate of the world. This is the truth of photography.

Part 3: Deflation and the Popular

Chapter 10: Domestic Squabbles: Modes of Scepticism and Forms of Popular Culture in 1990s British and US Art

"Some old Conceptual Art was often worked out on kitchen tables or in living rooms, in bed-sits and sometimes pubs. This was a world without studies, offices, libraries or museums. It often possessed a weird domesticity and lacked the swagger of big white man's culture"

Art & Language[231]

What is often forgotten about Conceptual Art is that it was made by young artists, with little money or resources, on the hoof. The McMoMA franchising of Conceptual Art in the 1990s as 'world historical event' was far from the self-perceptions of that generation. Indeed the flailing around, the trying-on of things, the cantankerousness, the theoretical bravado, the antagonism or indifference to all the huffing and puffing of humanist art-loving, made Conceptual art remarkably low-fi in its ambitions. The megalomania and metaphysics came later. In fact the best of Conceptual Art was avowedly 'amateur' in tone and ideals. That is, it offered a direct challenge to the moribund artistic professionalism of the time by contaminating the standards, values and artistic categories of the academy with the autodidact appropriation of non-artistic knowledges and procedures, making it impossible for the enraptured audience of Modernism to judge Conceptual Art by Modernism's existentially inflated standards. In this respect its own intellectual and cultural demands came before any spurious internationalism and modernity. If this meant a withdrawal from the claims of the Modernist aesthetic life, it also meant, by definition and extension, a withdrawal from the social relations and forms of association that determined the

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[231] Art & Language, unpublished notes to *Sighs Trapped by Liars*, 1998, unpaginated

production and reception of Modernist art. The loose communal relations of Conceptual Art, its avant-garde critique of the studio as the primary site of art's production and the museum as the 'home' of art's social value, and mocking derogation of the artist as as robust 'primitive', posh aesthete or egregious entrepreneur, radicalized what artists did and said, how they worked and who they thought were important and worth talking to. The net outcome of this was that by the late 1960s Modernism's internationalism began to appear deeply parochial and had become the language of management, and thus unable to generate a critique of its own historical origins.

The 'localism of conceptualism, therefore, can be seen as one more moment in art's negative dialectic this century; by declaring that a period of corruption or academicism has entered the production and reception of art the social relations of the art are held to be unlivable. When Cézanne moved back to Provence and began to paint Mont St.Victoire obsessively, the renewal of 'touch and perception' out of the forces of nature became the main focus of an attack on what he held to be the decadence into which the metropolitan themes of Impressionism had fallen. Those who mistrusted the metropolitan administration of art and its cliques would gather around Cézanne's example. Similarly the 'parodic' destabilization of Cézanne in Cubism was at the expense of Cézanne's isolationism and anti-metropolitanism. Cubism was a return to painting as a metropolitan discipline, and the metropolitan studio as a site of social exchange, a place where artists, writers and dealers would meet and socialise.[232]

Thus, although speaking form very different social and geographical positions, the importance of locale and the local in Cézanne, and Braque and Picasso, are defended as the site of art's renewal. But since Cubism, of course, the landscape has played an increasingly remote part in this would-be dialectic of renewal and

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[232] See Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism*, Yale University Press, 1994

counter-renewal through the local. The last significant rejection of the metropolitan experience as an ideological critique of an 'academic metropolitanism was the work of Robert Smithson and other artists who rejected Conceptual art's 'technical' critique of Modernism in the name of a socially renewed extra-gallery practice. Ironically, then, Conceptual art's own 'localism' was not local enough; getting your hands dirty, quite literally, negotiating with publics and agencies other than cultural ones, learning and applying knowledges other than those associated with the museum and the studio, was considered to be a far more socially engaged response to the crisis of Modernism than sorting out the logical consequences of what might or might not be considered an artistic act. Since then the local and the international have been played out through the internal conflicts of the metropolitan artworld itself, as the increasing globalization of capital and the culture industry has weakened modern art's symbolic relationship to nature and the symbolic naturalization of underdevelopment.

There are two things to be considered as a consequence of this. Firstly, today the 'local' is tied to a post-colonial understanding of African, Asian and South American metropolitan cultural identities as competing 'localisms' on a world stage; and secondly with the rapid cultural administration of art, there is a greater and faster awareness of the assimilation and narration of the national and indigenously local *as* the international. That is the processes of capitalist monopolization in culture and education transform the 'local' into the global with unrelenting efficiency. But, of course, this remains an uneven process, dependent on the strengths of national economies, the international power of their cultural industries, and the popularity of those cultural industries in a global market. In this way certain 'localisms' have a quicker and more privileged access to these global circuits of power than others given their language of transmission and the 'cultural capital' or 'exoticism' they provide for other national audiences.

Which brings me inevitably to the global reach and power of Anglo-American popular culture and its relationship to the global success of American art, and recently British art. With the vast economic penetration of American capital and culture, the 'localisms' of American and British popular culture become the common language and reference points of large stretches of the globe. This has meant that for much of humanity since the 1950s the actual and symbolic goods of global capitalism has been exchanged in the English language. Indeed, the success of American film, literature and popular music and British popular music has meant that the narration of social experience under late capitalism has been mediated largely through Anglo-American national identities. As Godard said in 1980 of French culture in the 1950s, "we are living under the mythology of the American film".[233] This maybe a commonplace, but it is a commonplace regularly forgotten when it comes to the global penetration of American, and recently, British art. For without the economic penetration of Anglo-American mass culture and popular culture, the cultural resources and status of American and British art in the latter part of the 20th century would not have the force they have; just as, in turn, the 'localisms' of art in Britain (and Europe) are inseparable from their critical mediation of American art and mass culture itself. This is why, relative to the US, the 1990s has seen the reemergence of British art internationally. For a rising conjunction of economic and cultural forces has made it possible for British art to compete collectively on an international basis since the 1960s. In fact in the 1990s British art has achieved an unprecedented cultural ascendancy over American art, leaving a good deal of contemporary art in the US in the unenviable position of a supporting role, despite the shared cultural reference points, anxieties and spectres.

As is now well know this rise to cultural prominence has been labelled 'Cool

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[233] Jean-Luc Godard, *Introduction a une véritable histoire du cinéma* vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Alabatros), 1980, p92, quoted in Kristin Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture, MIT, 1995, p44

Britannia', Brit Art or yBa, in an orgy of nationalistic sentiment, which even sections of the US media have embraced as they look to the New Labour administration for tips on the new cultural industries. It doesn't take much effort to make a mockery of this, just as it is easy to point out how uneven a lot of the new art is, and how self-regarding much of it has become. As the memory of 'Sensation' at the Royal Academy of Art fades with the allure of Tony Blair's New England, the new art takes a dip below the horizon. However, in terms of the logics of the local today, and the continuing power of Anglo-American popular culture to define what's hip globally - the local at the global level - art in Britain in the 1990s represents an interesting set of responses to the local/international dialectic of the modern art institution.

Clearly, the market success of (some) contemporary art in Britain lies in how its 'localisms' - the ideological landscape of post-Thatcherite Britain - have been narrated through the foci of youth and youth culture. *Brilliant!* (1995) the first major exposition of the new art abroad, at the Walker Art Centrer, Minneapolis, traded on a post-punk frisson of danger, hedonism and dole-queque anger, all those qualities, in fact, that have made British pop, design and fashion so successful internationally since the 1960s.[234] The 'personalities' that emerged from this have in turn given a biographical focus to the artistic 'transgressions', 'confrontations' and 'outrages'. Thatcher's artists: mad, bad and dangerous to know! As a result the public consumption of the art has come to rest on a national version of a post-Warholian 'star' system. In order to make the art consumerable as 'style' the media is overwhelmingly driven by the imperatives of a culture industry keen to mix art and celebrity in the pleasures of the new music, new fashion, etc. An art celebrity pecking order is now in place, with Damien Hirst, restaurant owner, pop video maker and 'national treasure', firmly ensconced at the top, able to hold his own against other popular cultural icons.

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[234] See *Brilliant! New Art From London*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1995

This successful promotion and narrativisation of the art as a contribution to national popular culture, then, has much to do with the way the media has identified the art as conforming to its own anti-intellectual and popular-cultural agendas; and how many of the artists, such as Hirst, Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas, are willing to go along with this (whether in the short-term or not). By divesting themselves of the professional rhetorics and ideological baggage of the 'modern artist' they talk down the critical discourse in exchange for media anointment and 'profile sexiness'. This has had conservative and radical critic alike frothing at the mouth, denouncing the art for its narcissism and commercial mendacity. Indeed, the success of the new art is a breath away, it is claimed, from a national Blairite conspiracy, in which Peter Mandelson, James Palumbo, the editors of Frieze, Loaded and GQ magazines meet regularly to decide the future of UK Cultural Industries Plc. In fact once Charles Saatchi is factored in, the art is no more nor less a phantasm of the market and the marketeers.

This is a familiar response to the power of cultural industries to transform the 'localisms' of a national culture into the cultural capital of national self-definition. The value of the art is sustained only through public relations and tendentious opinion-making. But cultural industries cannot create cultural capital on this scale and with this reach without the art having a life and some quality beyond its spectacular mediation. Thus whatever corruptions may ensue from the monopolistic powers of one major collector or dealer, does not thereby mean the new art is only - and fragilely - sustained by the machinations of the market. The art embodies qualities, values, interests, voices that are the product of relations that exist prior to, and beyond, the dehistoricized and reified world of the new cultural industries and their artworld epigones. The law of value may acculturate art in powerfully conservative ways - particularly during periods of social crisis and national confidence building - but the meanings, ideals and practical implications that flow from the work, are not fixed by those who have the power

to speak for the art, whether they are employed at the Royal Academy, Channel 4, of Boundary Road. Consequently those who attack the market profile of the art have to take account of what it is about the new art in Britain that is *collectively* and *socially* significant. In short: what is it about the art's 'localisms' and their conditions of production and reception that are vivid and repay critical attention? Crucially, then, any serious criticism of the new art has to reconstruct the moves and tropes of the 'local' in art from out of a discussion of the intra and inter-discursive struggles of the modern art institution. Which in turn means returning to the crisis of the art's national/international formation.

I have argued recently on a number of occasions that the initial impetus and success of the new British art rests on its critical negotiation in the 1980s with the high-theoretical demands of critical postmodernism.[235] The tenets of critical postmodernism - the critique of identity, representation and the Modernist art institution - as they emanated from New York galleries and art history departments and art history and cultural studies departments of British Universities, had a fundamental influence on shaping the development of art education in Britain in the 1980s. In fact, the production of serious art in the 1980s, particularly in London, and specifically at Goldsmiths, followed the general institutionalization of postmodernism/post-structuralism in Western Europe and North America as the cultural and theoretical *raison d'être* of the new movement politics, or identity politics. Accordingly the institutionalization of critical postmodernism represents the post-1970s secularization - in Edward Said's sense[236] - of the critique of Western culture's 'exclusionary' and monolithic structures.

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[235] See for example, 'Mad For ! Philistinism, the Everyday and the New British Art', *Third Text*, No 35, 1996, and 'Livin' It Large', in ed., Silvia Eiblmayr, *Zonen der ver-storung/Zones of Disturbance*, Steirischer herbst, Graz, 1997, and 'Everyday Icons', interview with John Roberts by David Green, *Creative Camera*, No 347, 1997

[236] Edward Said, *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, Faber and Faber, 1984

In these terms the feminist and anti-racist critique of Modernism's 'vulgar universalism' generated a massive re-narrativisation of the 'everyday' in art, as photography and video were theorized as the preeminent practices of late capitalist spectacle and technological expansion. With this the critique of representation bifurcated along sharp theoretical lines: between those who saw a critique of the everyday in terms of the counter-hegemonic and the recoding of dominant social ideologies ('social transformation' at the level of the sign), and those who saw the emergence of cultural difference more pessimistically against the wider and threatening backdrop of mass cultural manipulation, and the destruction of meaning itself: the school of simulationists and cultural nomads. This familiar cultural split between 'commitment' and 'nihilism' - or the poetics of negation and absence - within the modern in the 20th century, between Sartre and Blanchot, so to speak, has in the late-70s and 80s, however, been grounded in very different political and theoretical circumstances than those of the 1920s, 1930s, and even the 1960s.

By the 1970s - after Stalinism and fascism, after Fordism and the vast extension of the commodity form post-1945, and after the mass cultural 'perfection' of techniques of cultural control and the 'successful' assimilation of the labour movement into social democratic structures - the links between the politics of the avant-garde and social transformation were diminished and stunted, historically blocked. Indeed the two major manifestations of the 'classic' avant-garde after World War 11 - the Situationist International and Conceptual Art - were a self-fulfilling confirmation of this historical blockage. Both groups theorized and criticized the bourgeois institutions of art with the confidence of revolutionaries, buoyed by a wave of working class unrest across Europe, yet by 1975 the institutions of capital had regained ground and strength (particularly after the 'failed' Portuguese revolution of 1974), creating the conditions for the

widespread return to neo-liberalism and the free market in the 1980s.[237] The cultural impact of this was enormous. As welfare policies were dismantled, informal and formal networks of labour and the left thrown in disarray, older heavy industries broken up, new industries recapitalised, communications industries privatized, education re-hierachized, the last vestiges of the old avant-garde were buried under a 'new realism'. But if the historic avant-garde became associated with the closure of an early phase of the debate on art and social transformation, countervailing forces emerged as the memory of the older avant-garde fed into the radical-semiotic and counter-hegemonic moves and strategies of post-conceptualism.

1973-1978, the period of transition out of Conceptual Art's critique of Modernism, was also the period when cultural studies redefined notions of 'politics' and 'culture', and the hierarchies of pleasure. Turning to popular culture and mass culture as negotiated sites of pleasure (and not just the work of 'dominant ideology) cultural studies set out to dismantle both the high culture/popular culture divide and the idea of art as a set of practices centred on the development of 'expressive skills' rather than on representational and cultural-theoretical ones. The post-conceptual turn to ideology, specifically, the issue of mass-culture and the construction of subjectivity out of critical debates on film and photography, is co-extensive and co-present with this. Indeed it is the conjunction cultural studies/theories of ideology/post-conceptualism which lays the ground for the deconstruction of representation, identity and the museum in critical postmodernism and the post-70s 'secularization' of art.

Significantly, then, cultural studies is the point of transition between an older

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[237] The last gasp of this politics during this period was certainly in Spain after Franco's death in December 1975. Between 1976-1978 a large number of wildcat strikes, autonomous working class activity took place across the country in defiance of both the Stalinist and social democratic parties. See *Wildcat Spain: Encounters in Democracy, 1976-1978*, North Star Press, 1979

culture of 'resistance' based on the metaphors of distance and exclusion from popular culture and mass culture (Modernism, social realism) to one based on its critical negotiation. As such this has mean, at a fundamental level, a shift in the self-perceptions of the artist. The artist is no longer seen as someone who defines himself or herself solely through pushing forward the boundaries of a given medium (Modernism) or exposing injustice through the anecdotal rendering of the world (social realism), but as someone who is critically conversant with art and its histories as part of a wider engagement with questions of representation, power and ideology. By the mid-1980s this had been codified in critical postmodernism as the 'politics of representation', and therefore, by extension, had become aligned with feminist cultural criticism, post-colonial theory, and gay and lesbian theory or queer theory. As a result this is also evidence of the changed *positions*, *demands*, and *expectations* of cultural critique during this period of unfettered free market ideology. In conditions where labour's direct confrontation with capital has been severely weakened, and where feminism, anti-racism and gay and lesbian politics have transformed notion of the polity, politics and culture coalesce in the critique of identity and the sign. In effect, the new democratic forces of the current period represents the extensive *politicization* of culture, in circumstances where mainstream politics are widely discredited and where 'collective' ideologies are roundly attacked by the right and the new left. By this I don't mean that we are living through a period of radicalized culture in the sense that the early avant-garde or Conceptual art in the 1960s understood this, but that in conditions where the efficiency of capital and the hierarchy of labour is defended at all costs, the politicization of culture is 'politics by other means', insofar as it is one area where non-dominant and disaffirmative values can be debated, and discursively reconstructed in everyday life and common exchange.

In these terms the institutionalization of critical postmodernism is evidence of the democratic concessions conceded by capital under its new phase of

modernization, the period of transition from the end of the long post-war boom to the repressed continuum of the world economy we are now living through (1976 -).[238] At the level of state policy in social administration and education (including art education) in Western Europe and North America this is the period of widespread advances for women, gay and lesbians and black people. In higher education, for example, the radical changes in the curriculum and in non-white, non-male staffing and student quotas, are unimaginable for those who studied or came to maturity in the 1940s and 1950s. The unevenness of these developments are easily pointed to, as the gap between official rhetoric and the realities of racism, xenophobia, homophobia in so-called democratic communities across Europe and North America strengthens the hand of conservative politicians and cultural critics. The vicious struggles between a reactive, Christian monoculturalism and the new multiculturalism continues to split lower and higher education in the USA and France.[239] Reactionary forces are regrouping.However, in terms of cultural tendencies and their *long-term collective effects*, these advances have radically transformed certain sectors of the cultural industries and education, particularly the humanities, bringing about an extension of bourgeois democracy unimaginable to its conservative supporters and radical critics alike fifty years ago.

In these terms the new art in Britain in the 1990s represents both an assimilation to, and local divergence from, these uneven cultural tendencies. That is, the new art looks the way it does primarily because it is the product of the first generation of artists to experience at first hand the institutional critique of Modernism *and* its academicization. By the early 90s the successful incorporation of critical postmodernism into higher education in Britain was beginning to produce its own

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[238] For an extensive discussion of this period, see István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition*, Merlin 1995

[239] For an excellent overview of these struggles in the US, see Ismael Reed, *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*, Penguin, 1997

modes of dissension. By this I don't mean art students were beginning to criticise critical postmodernism for its philosophical idealism or political substitutionalism, or for its collapse of art history into cultural studies. These criticisms were never an issue or a possibility in a period of political and cultural consensus around critical postmodernism. But rather, there was an increasing disappointment in the languages of postmodern critique itself. The high-theoretical languages of deconstruction, the appeal to a second-hand Situationism, the affirmative politics of identity (of non-identity), the overarching theories of capitalist spectacle, the rhetorics of entropy and endism, seemed to build a conflicting and conservative barrier around the production of new work. For instance a new generation of black artists in Britain were no longer interested in having their identities as mediated solely through issues of race and ethnicity. Whereas questions of blackness had been crucial in shifting the race-blindness of Modernism, and as such restoring the content of black experience to modern art in the 1980s, by the early 1990s this had itself become a constraint on the art's development. 'Identity' was being used by the public sector to confine black art to notions of its own and others' idealised notions of 'blackness'. In this the disappointments in the commercial art market and state sectors became increasingly matched by disappointment in those concepts and theories that supposedly offered a way of negotiating with these forces. Thus, even if the nationalist promotion of the new art has sought to write out, or marginalize, the contribution of black artists in Britain to the new post-conceptual agenda - and as a consequence many black artists have been strongly opposed to the new art in Britain - some of these artists have seen a possible alliance - albeit temporary. Third-generation post-colonialist black artists such as Chris Offili and Yinka Shonabera have directed their own sceptical attentions to the first-generation of black artists which helped form them. The recourse to the rhetoric and themes of black nationalism have faded. Consequently, what is distinctive about the work of some younger black and white *English* artists is the way they are willing to use and mine the signs and emblems of official and unofficial English national

identities, identities that have long been submerged under the imperatives of Irish, Scottish and Welsh anti-metropolitanism and radical regionalism. Britain's imperialist special relationship with the US is no weaker and no less prone to old-fashioned economic interventionism in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. However, with the end of the Cold War, the (interrupted) cease fire in Ireland, the developing historical distance from forms of colonial administration, and the increasing presence of black and new immigrant cultures within the national culture, contestatory and popular national identities now have much more room to breath. Without saying the new art's English 'localisms' derive directly from this conjunction of forces, nevertheless these changes have brought about a discernible opening up of the national culture to its unofficial histories and unofficial popular forms. In this sense it is possible to see a shift of attention among younger non-white artists to the question of 'Englishness', a loosening of the usual ideological reserve. There is an attempt to extend what it might mean to be an English artist in confrontation with the old colonialist/paternalist and pastoralist identities that have consciously and unconsciously shaped the reception and development of modernism in Britain and the notion of English art's 'apartness', from Alfred Munnings through to Patrick Heron. Pop art in an important sense was the first post-war movement to question and shift these allegiances, largely as a result of the influx of working class students into the art schools in the 50s and 60s in the wake of the 1944 Education Act. The new art extends this process of scrutiny. In fact one of the outcomes of the new art is the way black and white artists have found ways of identifying and negotiating notions of 'Englishness' without recourse to conservative national myths of 'exceptionalism'. If there is a 'politics' in the new art art, it lies here in the construction of a critical post-colonialist national identity for the artist through the absorption, from below, of the sceptical energies of a British popular (multi) culture.[240]

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[240] One artist who stands out as a transitional figure between the remnants of an older English national cultural formation and the construction of a post-colonial one is Mark Wallinger. Wallinger was perhaps the first post-conceptual artist in the 1980s to reflect

In these terms in the early 1990s there was a shaking free of the expectations of the new radical postmodern academy. But why exactly did this take off in Britain? Firstly language: the British art school system was a privileged transmission belt of American critical postmodernism; secondly, the weak links historically between the art market, the museum system and theoretical academy, unlike in the US, discouraging a bland culture of professionalism; and thirdly, the vitality and strength of a commercial popular culture in Britain, which was an immediate focus for dissent from what was perceived as the growing gap between the realities of recession hit Britain and the failed ideologies of critical postmodernism. This meant that the disappointments in critical postmodernism were given a preemptive focus in Britain, where students had been exposed to the new radical academy through the late 80s and early 90s. But the dissent from the radical American academy, was not in itself an anti-American ideology; indeed the 'localisms' of the new art are largely a reworking of dissident US West Coast 'localisms', which in the 1980s had resisted the intellectual dominance of New York. This replayed, in certain respects, the appropriation of West coast Conceptual art by British post-conceptual artists in the mid-70s, such as Victor Burgin, John Stezaker and John Hilliard, who, in key respects, provided the ideological ground for US critical postmodernism in the late-70s. Indeed this dialectic reveals how much of post-war British and American culture has been a process of exchange, contamination and negotiation, in which 'localisms' in one culture find their development in another.

It is clear that the first notable punk bands were from the US (The Electric Eels, circa 1972), but it took the cultural impact of the Sex Pistols and the Clash in

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back critically on notions of Englishness, and English national identity, in a language that was confidently engaged in the pleasures and alienations of English popular culture. The narration of his own 'otherly-cultured' identity as an artist, undoubtedly feeds into the popular cultural concerns of the new art - despite his antipathy to many of its moves and interests.

particular, across a relatively small geographical area, to define the use-values and critical tone of punk for other national cultures. Punk was 'collectivized', proletarianized in Britain and then exported to the States. This does not mean that Britain is a vast R & D department for the US market, but that the relations between popular culture, youth, and class identifications within a given national space, have proven again and again in Britain to solidify quickly, producing unprecedented levels of production and consumption of popular musics outside of the dominant cultural industries, giving a competitive edge to British popular culture. The continued success of this on the ground has partly to do with vagaries of the British social security system which until recently allowed artists and musicians to claim dole without too much pressure to find alternative work, and the penetration of popular culture as a dissident set of values and aspirations within wide sections of black and white working class youth and the lower-middle class, This is exactly what happened in 1987-88 with the rise of techno/House/Acid, as the incorporation of new technologies into the production of new dance cultures, generating new popular cultures of resistance out of what initially was a reworking of disco. Although much of the music was developed out of the Detroit and Chicago dance scene (which in turn mutated out of British post-punk electronic rock) it was the cultural and collective energies surrounding the music in Britain which established the diversity and significance of the new electronic dance culture (which is now being sold back to a mass audience in the US as forms of high-tech spectacle).

In conditions of local/international dislocation artistic precedent cannot in itself secure national cultural significance and diversification. Which is exactly what happened to the art of the mid-to-late 80s on the West Coast of America. It is clear in terms of ethos, cultural reference points, neuroses, and mannerisms, new art in Britain in the 1990s owes its negotiation with New critical postmodernism to the abject and comical strategies of the West Coast school of 'pathetic art'. In the 80s the art of Mike Kelly, Paul McCarthy, Lari Pittman in LA stood its

ground against East coast critical postmodernism from a position of a socially dissident humour.[241] The mutant, the putrefied, the self-abnegated in this work, returned the representation of the body (particularly the male body) to a theatre of grotesque alienation. Without doubt the grotesque and aburdist ironization of the effects of commodification fill out the framework of critical postmodernism. Cindy Sherman is no slouch here. But in Kelly and McCarthy the ironized signs of physical and mental retardation and congenital 'stupidity' cut an abreactive line through official and intellectual languages of dissent, producing a grim mockery of critical postmodernism's claims to social interventionism. Indeed what marks out the LA scene is the reconnection of art to the rhetorics of 'rock 'n' roll expressionism' and gothic nihilism, which New York critical postmodernism has turned its back on in favour of a photographic reworking of post-conceptual cool. Art in Britain in the 1990s shares this space of 'morbid' and 'humorous' dissension, mixing popular genres and forms with interdisciplinary enthusiasm. But these precedents have, until recently, remained shadowy presences largely because of these artists own marginality within the US. It is only with the collective transformation of some of the interests of this art in Britain in the 1990s, that Kelly, McCarthy and Pittman etc, are now taken seriously , or taken seriously enough to be included in big international shows with younger artists and have glossy monographs written about them. Although we can point to artistic antecedents in the US in the 1980s it is the cultural extension and transformation of these tendencies under different social conditions in Britain that marks out what is significant about the art of the 1990s. That is, a particular explosive conjunction of social and cultural forces in Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s and 1990s made it possible to pick up and run with a number of issues and strategies considered marginal and trivial.

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[241] On the West Coast the group show 'Helter Skelter' at MOCA had a comparable cultural - if not popular national impact - as 'Sensation'. This show included both Kelly and McCarthy. For a brief discussion of the LA/London connection see, Peter Wollen, 'Thatcher's Artists', *London Review of Books*, Vol 19, No 21, 30 October 1997

When Damien Hirst and friends organized 'Freeze' in the London Docklands in 1988 it didn't just represent a coming together of a new generation of artists, but a moment of economic and cultural resettlement for late 80s art. The last recession had wiped out the glory days and 'high-drama' of the mid-80s art boom, forcing younger artists to once again rely on their own organisational and promotional efforts to 'move the culture forward'. At the time younger artists were trapped between a moribund private sector showing the remnants of the 'glitzy' new US and European painting, and a public sector driven by the new alliance between lens-based work and identity politics. The 'Freeze' artists may have wanted a new place in the sun - which some of them got - but they also wanted a culture of practice and conversation which they could call their own. This did not mean that younger artists held no faith in public funding of the arts, but that the criteria of public funding was no longer able to reflect or coincide with the realities of art production in cost-cutting driven Thatcherite Britain. The need for an independent network of spaces and project-initiatives was an absolute imperative in order to reconnect the conditions of art's production with what was perceived as the 'lived experience' of the artist: the fact that the majority of artists, unemployed or on low incomes, are neither involved in social production nor exchange or consumption on any meaningful level.

Revealingly, then, 'Freeze' was a show filled with the kind of work that was in abeyance: cool post-minimalism - the ironic art of an indefatigable ideological stalemate between a disowned past and an unfathomable future. As the new spaces proliferated in the East End, as a post-'Freeze' generation grew in confidence, as the new popular dance and club cultures began to identify a new sense of modernity and belonging, as the dissensions of dole-culture began to find a new ideological shape, a new collective sense of breaking with the professional claims of the academy based practice began to emerge. In this atmosphere of 'retreat' and 'letting go', the high-theoretical demands of post-conceptual art rewritten by critical postmodernism out of French post-structuralism seemed to

prevent any affective engagement with the alienated boredoms, frustrations and pleasures of the culture that artists experienced on a daily basis: no money, bad housing, bad TV, and drugs. Indeed the double-ideological-whammy of zero-sum simulation theory and the critique of the subject made the truth of the artists own experience appear inauthentic and second-hand.

Such everyday realities have been no different for innumerable previous generations, but such were the professional expectations of artists in the late 80s, that the available role-models and ego-ideals - aesthete, artist-intellectual, social interventionist - in conditions of widespread poverty and diminished prospects for artists seemed either strangely corrupt or ineffectual. The subjective outcome was a post-conceptual mediation of the 'crisis of art' and its institutions through a return to the alienations, reifications and fetishisms of everyday living, as a means of connecting art to what seemed to have a greater authenticity. According to Maurice Blanchot the 'everyday' challenges heroic living;[242] and in this sense the cultural impact of the new art in its use of snapshots, cheap videos, the diaristic and confessional, and the genres and forms of popular culture, is a 'realist' move. By this I mean the conditions of art's critical renewal are performed out of the social conditions which both seem to prevent the flourishing of art (daily material and cultural impoverishment) and reconnect the artist with his or her own experiences and desires (the imperatives of self-transformation). In these terms the new art "seeks to recapture the secret destructive capacity that is in play"[243] in the everyday, in a language without false pathos. As a result it is the 'localisms' of the art that again serve notice on what are perceived as the unlivable social relations of the art of the dominant academy or prevailing culture of art.

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[242] Maurice Blanchot, 'La Parole quotidienne', in *L'Entretien infini*, Gallimard, 1959. Translated as 'Everyday Speech' in *Yale French Studies*, No 73 1987

[243] Maurice Blanchot, ibid, p19

One of the major conflicts of post-war art education and cultural studies has been the dispute between the idea of culture as a 'way of life' and culture as the specialist 'practices of art'. The former is largely identified with a 'popular culture' from below (with everyday working class customs, traditions, and modes of resistance), rather than popular culture from 'above' (commercial entertainment), the latter with the professionally trained skills and forms of high culture.[244] The most palpable and destructive effect of this split has been the disjunction between education and the customary experience of the working class or lower-middle class student. Indeed the experience of art education for the post-war working-class or lower-middle class student has been the 'training out' of the common pleasures and experiences of popular culture. Pop artists though broke through this deracination by incorporating the pleasures of popular culture and mass culture into their work without condescension. Critical postmodernism continued this historical tendency, but situated the embodied pleasures of popular culture and mass culture in art as the site of social critique from within the space of the university. The new art, on the other hand, incorporates the commercialized pleasures of the popular without embarrassment or intellectual distance. As with Pop art the new art refuses to disown or patronise what it sees as a shared or common culture, which, as I have argued elsewhere, is the return of an assertiveness in being 'otherly' cultured amongst artists from working-class or lower-middle class backgrounds.[245] But, unlike Pop art, the new art is refracted through a post-conceptual performance of artistic scepticism. At the same time as the work incorporates non-specialist modes of attention it recognises, as Dave Beech, has put it: "that art is indefensible".[246] Hence the performance of

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[244] For a discussion of the history of these conflicts and disputes in Britain, see Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies 1945-65: Cultural Politics, Adult Education and the English Question*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1997

[245] For an analysis of the links between Pop art and the new art, see John Roberts, 'Pop Art, The Popular and British Art of the 1990s', in Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin, and Julian Stallabrass eds., *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writings on Recent British Art*, Black Dog, 1998

[246] Dave Beech, 'Strange Company', *Artifice*, No 3, 1995, p104

scepticism is exactly that, a performance - it does not mean the unequivocal denunciation of art. The performance of scepticism affirms the crisis of traditional principles, attributes and modes of presentation of art-making, while relying on them to determine the practice of the performance itself. As Drew Milne argues: "the performance of a negative attitude or critical relation allows scepticism to undermine the condition of art's reality, but without undermining its own conditions as a performance of sceptical undecidability".[247] As such, he goes on to say, "the performance is scepticism [is] a defining problem in contemporary art".[248] But this performance produces very different kinds of practices.

What is different about the new art's performance of scepticism is its ideological shift away from an 80s counter-hegemonic performance of scepticism on the institutions of art and the Modernist conception of the autonomous artwork. There is little art in the 1990s being made on the mythos of the autonomous artwork or the crisis of the liberal inclusiveness of the museum. The performance of scepticism has shifted predominantly into the area of what Peter Sloterdijk has described as the pleasures of cynical reason.[249] The outcome of this is that the return to the everyday as a return to the customary pleasures of the popular reflects a general shift to an art which explores the alienations of the artistic apparatus *through* the alienations of the everyday. By this I don't mean that alienation has become a distinct subject area for the new art, a theme, but that in performing a sceptical understanding of art through the genres and forms of the popular this generation adopt a more inclusive view of popular modes of attention in the artwork. It is in the performance of the alienated pleasures of consumption that the embodied pleasures of popular culture are taken to be ethically

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[247] Drew Milne, 'The Performance of Scepticism', in ed., Juliet Steyn, *Act 3 - Endgame*, Pluto Press, 1997

[248] Drew Milne, ibid, p58

[249] Peter Sloterdijk, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, Verso 1988

ambiguous. This makes the purported 'hedonistic subjectivity' of the new art significant. For with the adoption of a post-conceptual framework of sceptical artistic reflexes and modes of address the boundary between art as a 'way of life' and art as a set of autonomous practices is weakened. The result is an art whose scepticism about its own means is also performed on the identity of the artist as 'distanced professional'. This represents the historically qualitative transformation of the new art, what David Perreau, has suggestively called the 'belittling' of Modernism and the avant-garde[250] - or in more openly disaffirmative terms, the revenge of being 'otherly' cultured on this art. There are innumerable instances of this, but a few will suffice: Jonathan Monk pissing on a Richard Serra, Gavin Turk's scrappy Robert Morris mirror boxes, Keith Tyson's casting of Kentucky Fried Chicken menus in lead, Damien Hirst's DIY suicide video, Rebecca Warren's and Feargal Stapleton's cum video, Sarah Lucas's sausage eating video, Richard Billingham's photographs of his self-brutalizing working-class family. In this way recapturing "the secret destructive capacity that is in play" in the everyday is about openly incorporating both the good and ugly aspects aspects of the artist's life into his or her practice. This is a generation who descent into the everyday has involved the remaking of the modern performance of scepticism as a narrativization of their own ordinary and routine experiences. Hence we might describe the new art as a kind of humbling of both Modernism and postmodernism in conditions where the social claims of art that it cracks the social exclusivity of the dominant institutions of art have seemed even more distant than the Situationists and Conceptual art ever believed. The outcome has been twofold from this: one, the production and reception of the art is directly associated with everyday activities (eating, meeting friends, idleness, sex, going to the pub, getting drunk, taking drugs), and two; an art that seeks a sceptical informality from inside the codes and conventions of professionalism.

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[250] David Perreau, see his writings on Jonathan Monk, in particular 'L'imitateur, Chugalug the beer, don't swallow the rules', *Artpress*, no 236, June 1998

Overall the new art evokes a domestication of Modernism and postmodernism, a deflation of their forms, setting and themes that appears to cohere with the current vogue for micro-narratives: the histories of discrete objects or small-scale communities. In renarrativising the small-change of daily alienations the artist is shown to act in empathy with 'what is at hand'. However, these processes of domestication meet up with, and transform and are transformed by the critical legacies they are working through. Despite the distance taken from the counter-hegemonic machinery of critical postmodernism the new art is no less grounded in debates on the politics of representation and identity than the work of Cindy Sherman and Mary Kelly. The difference is that the reliance on theory is no longer attached to any programmatic social or artistic agenda.

The extensive and distinctive participation of women in the formation of the new art, therefore, is not to be taken for granted. It is evidence of the increasing power of women artists to determine the public meanings of their art in a situation where the performance of scepticism on the the institutions and prevailing professional categories of art has threatened the comfortable inclusion of the male artist; in this sense the re-narrativization of the everyday is inseparable from the counter-narrations of history and subjectivity explored by women artists and writers from the late 1960s. But, at the same time, this is a generation of artists whose relationship to questions of femininity, gender and identity is not determined principally by the struggles of first and second generation feminists. That is, their relationship to the histories of feminism and women's art is as much conditioned by an awareness of its mistakes and hiatuses as it is by its strengths. Indeed the historical weaknesses of the categories 'feminist art' or 'women's art' - or any other instrumental category - is something that this generation of women artists have internalized. There is now a legitimate and widespread fear that such categories confine the work of women to a self-image that no longer reflects the day to to day experience of women artists. But more pointedly such categories prevent women experiencing their *own* dissonant feelings and dark desires. The

re-narrativization of the everyday for younger women artists, therefore, has meant a reconnection with both the prosaic-everyday as a space for re-gendering (football and competitive games seem to be a recurring subject) and the illicit-everyday as a space for appropriation and recoding (pornography for example). In sum there has been a vigorous repositioning of the feminine as the cultural expectations of the feminine have been widely challenged at work, entertainment and culture in the 1990s. As Paula Smithard has argued in an article on Lucas, Emin, Lucy Gunning and Sam Taylor-Wood. The use of a "brutalizing vulgarity" in much of the new work by women "destabilises the cultural subject position of masculinity and femininity, forcing them to re-signify their meanings".[251] The net effect is the putative 'masculinization' of the feminine-everyday. Where once the metaphors of hysteria, of female 'absence' or the 'other' dominated feminist cultural theory and art in the 1980s, today the feminine is performed as a troubling affirmation of women's sexuality, labour and social role.[252]

The challenge to the feminine-as-absence has also brought about a comparable engagement with masculinity on the part of young male artists. One of the common complaints against much of the new art by men, is that it plays out, in various guises, a boorish masculinity; a New Lad attitudinizing; Matt Collishaw gobbing at the viewer; Bank simulating a cheap porn movie (with their clothes on). However, this is short-sighted and partial. In the 1980s the impact of second-generation feminism on work by men and women directed a number of younger male artists to take a look at their own masculinity. Much of this work dealt with sexuality and was mostly by gay artists; heterosexual male artists were conspicuous by their absence. In the 1990s, though, younger heterosexual make

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[251] Paula Smithard, 'Grabbing the Phallus by the Balls: Recent Art by Women', *Everything*, No 21, 1996, p5.

[252] For a discussion of these changes, see John Roberts, Chapter 9, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, 1998

artists have taken up the issue touching on the darkness of masculinity, its aggressions and morbidities as much as its frailties, in an attempt to work through the cultural options and possible identities for the de-heroicized, sceptical (white) male post-conceptual artist. Much of this work seems to have thrown off the guilt of men-in-feminism of the 1980s, as if the loss of conviction in the ideal of the Great Artist or artist-intellectual has allowed a space for men to stage both the impostures and pleasures of masculinity. In this sense to talk about the alienations of the everyday in this work is to recognise how much masculinity here is equated with the extension of adolescence into adulthood and emotional failure. Hence the work tends to divide between those who confess and play-out their own 'incompetence' as artists and men (such as Patrick Brill, aka Bob and Roberta Smith) and those - the larger group - who reflect on the rituals, customs and pleasures of extended male adolescence. For instance, Roderick Buchanan's serial portrait of a group of Scottish park-football players who chose to play in Italian club shirts. This group-bonding is as much about identification through cultural exclusivity as it is about the 'localization' of the international and internalization of the local. In this respect the register in which these reflections on the rituals of masculinity are performed stress the commodification of masculinity as series of defence mechanisms. In Buchanan's work this has a specific class focus. In other work the sense of modern masculinity as an extended adolescence draws on what might be called the feminization of masculinity. In this work it as if the link between hysteria and powerlessness in women's art of the 1980s has shifted to that of the experience of men. For instance in Graham Ramsay's 1996 video of his fictional figure John Saxon (named after a British B-movie actor from the sixties), male domestic incompetence - in this instance the grotesque inability to make a brevil sandwich - becomes a moment of masculine self-destruction and emptiness. It is also more than a coincidence the number of artists who have used the obsessive school-book type list of loves and hates (Simon Patterson, Douglas Gordon) or adopted doodling or scrappy drawing (Paul Noble, Matthew Higgs) as a way of ordering

their neuroses and fantasies. Gordon for example in the 'Life/Live' show in Paris and Lisbon in 1997 - the big European showcase of the new art - produced an autobiographical reading/listening room consisting of 30 songs released in the first few months after his birth in 1966.[253] The song-list, which include The Byrds, The Beatles, The Small Faces and The Lovin' Spoonful, were played continuously on a loop. Naturally the making of lists is not gender-specific, but the way such lists passively order desire in male adolescence point to this work as another strategy of "belittling": the feminization of the masculine fetish of the index in Conceptual art. As in Jonathan Monk's explicit domestication of Modernism, the signs of masculine rigour and masculine 'scienticity' are contaminated and given an informal, subjective identity. In fact this informalization is a more nuanced way of looking at the notion of belittlement. For what informalization acknowledges is the incorporation of the formal *achievements* of Modernism and the avant-garde within the orbit of daily social habits and fantasies, rather than their empty parody. This is why it is Bruce Naumann, Gilbert & George and Lawrence Weiner, conceptual artists who themselves adopted a more informal approach in the 1960s, and who to a certain extent played the role of the artist as 'failure', that perhaps have had the greater impact on the new art. These artists' performance of scepticism through various mundane actions in everyday settings - walking around the studio, getting drunk in a pub, announcing the linguistic commonplace as a way of talking about meaning itself - have provided much of the 'cool' look and diffident cues of the sardonic styling in the new art. Indeed, as an *internalization* of the avant-garde's strategies of intellectual distanciation the new art's informality pulls the museum reception of Conceptual art back into the familiar spaces of the domestic. In short, the new art is bedroom, kitchen or living room art, reinventing the "weird domesticity" of the 1960s.

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[253] *Life/Live*, Arc, Paris, 1996-97, and Centro de Exposições/Centro Cultural de Bélem, Lisbon, 1997

But unlike Art & Language's description of Conceptual art above, the bedroom and the living room are not just sites of art's production and renewal 'from below', so to speak, but also *mis en scenes* for the prosaic-and-illicit-everyday. In these terms not only is the bedroom perhaps the favourite *mis en scene* of the new art, but it establishes the bedroom as a place of fantasy and control. The various acts of personal disclosure performed in bedrooms in numerous contemporary videos and photo-installations (Georgina Starr, Gillian Wearing, Deborah Holland) is evidence of a suture between the site of the work's production and its content. What was simply a site of production in Conceptual art and a site of tension between the values of the collective and those of public culture, now doubles as means of reflection on the gendered and alienated content of the domestic as a site of fantasy. The 'bedroom' and its mirrors and props, iconic mass cultural images and sounds becomes the primary scene of the mass cultural spectacle, a place where the fantasies of the feminine and the masculine are played out and reproduced. In these terms these artists stage the pleasures of infantalization and regression; or what Slavoj Zizek has called that surplus of enjoyment out of which ideology produces its effects.[254] From this perspective, therefore, the narcissistic self-display and voyeurism in the work of Georgina Starr, for instance, constitute the sceptical performance of an older feminine powerlessness: the desire to be valued and defined simply through your appearance. But to this end the image of celebrity is not ironized, but vampirized, treated as the legitimate extension of the artist's identity as someone-to-be-looked-at-and-admired. This is the post-Warholian concept of the artist as celebrity performed as an authentic simulation.

In general the localisms of the new art are inseparable from those wider global localisms of the mass cultural spectacle which currently drive the fantasies of the masculine and the feminine: the 'magical' transformation of the ordinary and

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[254] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso 1989

anonymous into the celebrated and unique. Thus it is not fortuitous that the recourse to documentary video in much of the new 'domestic' work has emerged at the same time as the TV confessional (predominantly sexual) and the voyeuristic real-time video or film of (working-class) people in distress or life threatening situations (Reality TV). In the 1990s the videoing and filming of tragedy and its aftermath, and the ordinary lives of those at work and play as a means of insight into 'human conflict', have dominated the air-ways in the US, Europe and Britain. If this simulates celebrity for its willing participants and victims, the simulation of celebrity through mimicry has also become popular. The television programme *Stars in Their Eyes* and the emergence of the tribute band have become so popular in Britain in the 1990s, that there is now a successful circuit of fake performers catering to the pleasure of popular cultural nostalgia - or more specifically to that moment or moments in people's lives when youth, sexuality, and popular music promised everything. From a similar perspective the 1990s have also been the decade of Fantasy League football and its simulation of the decisive managerial decision, the decision that will win your leadership respect not just from your peers but from the nation! As with the TV confessional's mimicry of celebrity Fantasy Leagues order desire around taking pleasure from the simulation of power. As such Fantasy League football is evidence of the adolescent list writ large. With the increasing capital investment in football (particularly in Britain) and the increasing inter-club mobility of star players there has, consequently, been greater emphasis on individual players' market status and therefore on their value against other plays, reinventing the professional commentator and spectator alike as a keen maker of lists and predictions.

The drive to hierachisize through consumption also shapes a great deal of popular cultural journalism. The exponential increase and diversification in musics and the niche production of films turned has turned cultural journalism into a kind of manic tabulation in which merit-stars and league positions 'sort-out' what is

worthwhile or naff for the culture-saturated consumer. Likewise the rise of the celebrity questionnaire has also fashioned a space within the 'participatory' space of mass culture - those spaces in which the consumer feels he or she is being directly addressed - for fantasy list-making, the fantasy of being chosen to select those three top tunes, those three top films, those three favourite books that will convince people of your excellent taste. When Adorno talked about the seductive infantilizations of mass culture he could have had the charms of list-making in mind. For the list establishes value with discursive justification: that is, it is cultural criticism without the effort. That contemporary art is awash with confessions - faked or otherwise - artist mimicking celebrities, (Edwin David posing as Nico), and lists and indexes and maps and charts posing as lists, does not mean that the art dreams itself to *be* popular, even if some artists would wish this true. But that the pleasures and modes of attention of popular culture have become a means of structuring the performance of scepticism without condescension to the popular.

The new art is a product of a continuing wave of disappointment with art's internal critique of itself from the late 1960s and Conceptual art onwards. In these terms it represents an intensification of the performance of scepticism in conditions of capitalism's repressed continuum. The domestication and "belittling" of Modernism and critical postmodernism is further evidence of the historical split between the formal challenges of the avant-garde and social transformation. Yet out of these conditions of retreat, in the 1990s in Britain a new community of artists were able to dismantle the old academic fealties; as a result a shift of sorts took place from the power of artworld professionals to the artist themselves, from public and commercial spaces to artist-run spaces. This shift in comparable in its effects, in not in its intentions, to the moment of Conceptual art. The return of the alternative space, the informality of the art's production and reception, the promotion of popular knowledges and autodidactic pleasures, the inclusion of 'otherly' cultured modes of address, of fan-based

pleasures, were necessary strategies in resecuring the autonomy of art against its educative, aestheticized or professional-radical incorporation. But the deflationary strategies of this art are the product of very different social and political circumstances than the deflationary strategies of the 1960s. This is generation of artists who in risking irresponsibility, imbecility, and dumbness in order to recover a sense of urgency and agency for art, have had to risk something more: the loss of historical consciousness. The result has been the general incorporation of the withdrawal of legitimacy in the ideals of Modernism and critical postmodernism into a de-historicized framework of the 'popular'. This is not to hold this work to ideological ransom, as if the job of artists is to be responsible to some overarching sense of the future; the travails of virtue are particularly well known from the institutional fate of critical postmodernism. The performance of scepticism in the new art is, essentially, a critique of the gap between the social ideals of critical postmodernism - art as counter-hegemonic practice - and the institutional power and bureaucratic prestige of such art. In the end, however, to turn away from history by domesticating the larger horizons of art is to diminish the kind and quality of artistic conversation that might be had, and to deplete the available resources out of which art's negations can continue to be made.

The new art's narrative if interruption in the academy and the market place is largely over. The community of practioners centred on a number of galleries in the East End of London is weakened and dispersed. Artists are moving on, and need to make a decent living. Artist run spaces are closing, some are prudently cutting back after funding cuts; some are now finding the job of sustaining a regular programme a burden when it once seemed a necessity. Moreover, as the new technological networks of artistic production and reception continue to open and diversify questions of aesthetic informality centred on the object loose their critical efficacy. The turn to the amateurish and the informal begins to look mannered and strained, as it did in Conceptual art by 1974. In one sense these are

the inevitable effects of cultural dispersal, in another sense though, they represent a loss of direction, as the inclusions of the market once again try to define the limits of the possible. The point, however, is to see the impact of the work beyond its market fate. What makes much of the art of the 1990s in Britain so compelling is not so much the informality of the work in and of itself, but the way it identifies a community of practioners who for a brief moment opened out a space for shared energies and aspirations outside of the professionalized academy. This is undoubtedly utopian, a fantasy of exclusion, but without these moments of unsettlement, imaginary or otherwise, we are all back in the museum waiting for the speeches and canapés.

Chapter 11: Trickster: Performativity and Critique in Rod Dickinson's 'Crop Circles'

Since 1991 Rod Dickinson has been involved in making crop-circles with other artists and friends. Under the cover of darkness, armed with string, simple wooden planks and an outline of their design, the group enter the field along the seed lines, taking care to avoid any crop damage. Once in position - far away from potential surveillance from the edge of the field - they work fast by moonlight, working to a prearranged pattern, completing the design by sunrise.[255]

Over the years these designs have become more complex, putting enormous strain on the group to finish the circles under darkness. This is risky, for there is now a 'price' on the heads of crop-circle makers. Pressure is being exerted by the National Farmers Union on local farming communities to prevent what is seen as a major irritant during the summer, although farmers themselves are not too keen to get involved directly as there are large amounts of money to be made opening up their fields to paying tourists. Moreover, there is some support from the UFO and crop-circle research, or Cerealogy, community itself for the 'hoaxers' to be exposed. (As yet no one in Britain has been caught, no one arrested). For what divides the crop-circle watching community more than anything else is the division between the 'hoaxes' and the so-called authentic circles, those circles that are claimed by the Cerealogists to be made without human intervention. These designs, according to 'expert' opinion, are those which could not possibly have been completed in darkness within a few hours. In Britain these complex designs are invariably produced by Dickinson and his helpers: the 'DNA Double Helix', the 'Koch snowflake' and the Julia-set fractal' amongst recent ones.

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[255] The personnel of the crop-circle team changes on a regular basis; however, since 1994 Dickinson has worked in close collaboration with the artist and web-site designer John Lundberg

In the Cerealogist literature any suggestion that these designs were made by humans is met with incredulity and passionate denunciation. In fact a great deal of 'scientific' evidence is marshalled to prove non-human intervention, for instance: changes in the cell structure of flattened stalks; consistent absence of entrance marks to the fields; alleged malfunctioning of electronic equipment in or near the circles; migrating birds swerving away from the fields; observation and photographing of unexplained lights over the circles; positive or deleterious changes to people's metabolism or state of being inside or near the circle.[256] This list is not exhaustive, but it gives a clear sense of what is of central importance for the Cerealogists: crop-circles are evidence of inexplicable forces which signal the wider impact of extra-terrestrial communications or paranormal intrusion in life on earth.

When Dickinson began making circles he was entering a tradition that was at least fifteen years old. In Britain the first circles were made by Dave Chorley (who died in 1997) and Doug Bower in the early 1970s. Begun initially as an enthusiastic response to the early conflation of New Age environmentalism and Ufology, their producers soon became locked into outwitting the 'true believers'. In effect Chorley and Bower had initiated a new folk tradition of temporal 'art events'. Drawing on country lore and mystical symbols they created the raw materials for a new paranormal mythology. It was the obvious success of this process of mythologizing which attracted Dickinson. With little physical effort and little financial outlay, Chorley and Bower were able to find an audience, and eventually a critical public, for their circles. But in a sense this is to make Dickinson's debt to their work too formal. For Dickinson came to the crop-circles armed with post-Situationist theories of art and social intervention, modern media theory and a post-conceptualist critique of the art institution, and not just a love of

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[256] See for example, Nancy Talbot, 'Crop Formations: The Biophysical Perspective'. *The Circular*, no. 27, Winter 1996/7

the English countryside and a passion for a 'good joke'. Yet, despite this, it is the very anonymous status of Chorley's and Bower's, and all the other crop-circle work, that provided a basis for Dickinson's art: to rethink crop-circle making as the basis for an enquiry into the conditions of modern mythology.

The anonymity of crop-circle making provides a perfect metonym for a critique of artistic authorship and artistic value, but in a social setting which remains outside of the art institution. This is because as a crop-circle maker Dickinson is able to operate without any of the constraints of appearing *not* to be an artist.The circles are, first and foremost, made for a non-art public made of Ufologists, Cerealogists, New Agers, etc. There is no question, therefore, of the circles being seen as a 'second-order' artistic activity before their primary validation as 'unexplained phenomena'. That is, Dickinson produces crop-circles within a tradition of amateur art practice which makes no substantive claims for the artistic self-consciousness of its activities. In fact, amongst amateur practioners such as Chorley and Bower, the most important thing worth attending to was whether the circles had been noted and categorized by the Cerealogists. In this Dickinson stepped into a rich tradition of amateur art, which has the power, as with earlier forms of folk art, to secure intellectual and aesthetic investment on the part of an enthusiastic non-specialist public.

But, if all Dickinson wanted to do was make a new folk art, if all he wanted to do was leave the art institution behind in the name of some spurious populism, then his activities would rightly be dismissed as opportunist and crass. What is significant about the crop-circles phenomenon is, paradoxically, their invisibility as amateur art or otherwise within the paranormal literature. For with the failure of the crop-circle writers to attend to the realities of human agency the notion of the crop-circle or 'Conceptual art' becomes the absent cause of their arguments. This produces a cleavage which is highly suggestive in the discussion of ideology and modern cultural division. What is laid claim to amongst its practioners as a

form of folk art is unable to be recognized as such because of the overwhelming need on the part of 'true believers' to affirm the extra-human at the expense of the human. Hence what is important about the crop-circle phenomenon for Dickinson is not just its status as a modern folk practice, but its cultural reception and misperception. That Cerealogist writers are prepared to argue for either the extraterrestrial or paranormal creation of the circles is not simply perverse, but culturally significant, pointing to needs and desires which modern forms of rationalism cannot meet.

Crop-circle writers can loosely be divided into two main camps: those who believe that the circles are produced by extraterrestrial forces, and those who believe they are produced by paranormal forces. The latter also include those who believe the circles are the result of 'energy points' on the earth's surface. What both camps share, however, is a belief in the spiritual importance of these manifestations. This is reinforced by the fact that all the major crop-circles - on the whole those made by Dickinson, such as the 'DNA Double Helix', 'Julia-set fractal' and 'Koch snow flake - were made in Wiltshire, the home of English paganism and New Age mythology. Covered in barrows, standing stones, tumuli and other earthworks (such as Silbury Hill), and numerous pathways, the area is claimed to be connected by an ancient network of sight lines. It is home, moreover, to a number of famous chalk figures, such as the Alton Barnes White Horse, which are etched into the county's hillsides. Wiltshire in, therefore, is a rich palimpest of ancient myth and historical record, a place literally pitted with arcane signs and significant remains. Crop-circles and ancient standing stones and tumuli form a 'metaphysical continuum'. This melange of paganism and the occult is a product largely of the 1970s, when Alfred Watkins' analysis of ancient lay lines (Anglo-Saxon for cleared strips of land) in *The Old Straight Track* (1925)[257] was rediscovered and formed part of the counter-cultural revival of

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[257] Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones*, Abacus, London, 1974

Celtic fairy lore (fairy paths) and the developing interest in the new earth sciences. The ley lines and other ancient markings were seen as 'energy centres' (places of magnetic force). Wiltshire appeared to possess more of these lines and markings than most making it the favoured place of occult lore, and one of the favoured homes of UFO 'sightings'. As one theory of the UFO phenomenon put it: spacecraft were attracted to places such as Wiltshire because of the predominance of its magnetic pathways, which they used for navigation!

It is no surprise that Dickinson and his colleagues chose to work here, for the location allows the crop circles to enter a preexisting mythological system of 'earth mysteries'. Thus when Dickinson produced the enormously complicated 'fractal' or 'Julia-set' design in a field adjacent to Stonehenge, the literature was quick to assume, given the occult importance of Stonehenge, that some extraterrestrial intelligence was trying to establish a significant connection between the two. This assumption is echoed in the way the literature analyses the crop-circle designs, claiming that ancient site lines and standing stones and crop-circles not only share 'unexplained' energy levels, but also a sacred geometry.[258] Moreover, in some instances where obvious icons of modern science are concerned, such as the 'Julia-set', this 'sacred geometry' is stretched to include the non-linear theories of nature of the New Physics, as if the earth was producing its own computer print out.

What is absent in this literature is any awareness that the crop-circle makers are mirroring back to the 'true believers' their own mythologies, knowledges and histories. Dickinson is as well versed in historical lore and the occult of the Cerealogists and Ufologists as the writers themselves. This makes his interventions extremely context-sensitive, as the crop-circles are made with the desires, fantasies and occult 'knowledges' of the 'true-believers' in mind. They

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[258] See for example, Jim Lyons, 'Gravitation plus Cavitation=Salvation?, *The Circular*, no.27, Winter 1996/7

are not ironic. Thus if the complexity of the recent designs is partly a response to Dickinson's own technical and aesthetic ambitions, it is also a way of upping the ante in response to the Cerealogists theories. This play-off between producer and consumer, mythologizer and believer, is at one level very similar to the practices and rhetorics of art and its theory. Hence in a strange mutation of classic avant-garde practice, Dickinson attempts to outmanoeuvre, or undermine, the claims and expectations of those theories that would seek to explain or predict the crop-circle designs. Concomitantly, there is also a sense in which the anti-materialism of Cerealogist theories is ventriloquizing the idealism and special pleading of much art criticism - a set of practices which are notoriously malleable ideologically in the face of economic pressure and personal flattery. But if this something to be borne in mind when reading the crop-circle literature this is not what is of primary interest about the play-off, or co-presence, of mythologizer and Cerealogist. For Dickinson's crop-circles enact one of the most widespread psychological conditions to be found in late capitalist culture, iatrogenesis, or co-dependence.

In the therapy-situation between doctor and patient it is common to witness a process of narrative suggestiveness on the part of the doctor come to shape and define the patient's illness in concordance with the social expectations of the illness itself. Thus the symptoms of the hysteric or neurotic can easily be produced out of the therapy situation - as Freud balefully recognized towards the end of his life. There is a strong evidence for this in the current outbreak of hysterical epidemics and imaginary illnesses (chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple personality disorder, recovered memory of sexual abuse). Multiple personality disorder is highly significant in this respect. Between 1922 and 1972 there were less than 50 cases documented in the medical literature.[259] Today, particularly in the US, there are thousands, due largely to the popularization of an alternative

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[259] See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p161

therapy culture in conjunction with a professionally aggressive psychoanalysis. What this therapy culture has created, some would argue, is a widespread and unprecedented permission for individuals to make a narrative of their own unhappiness and disappointments. It is not that this unhappiness and disappointment is necessarily imaginary - far from it - but that its symptoms are either medicalized or projected onto an external agency, placing more and more individuals in positions of victim and accuser. As therapy culture widens, and as patients become more susceptible in therapy to the narrative suggestions of the analyst, iatrogenesis conjoins symbiotically with other agendas (such as forms of radical feminism, vacuous conspiracy theories and evangelical religious beliefs). In effect, the patient learns to tell his or her story from the narratives that are publicly disseminated by the therapists, extending and reinforcing the story in the therapy session itself. This is, no more nor less, than the mediatization of illnesses. What is produced is an unprecedented closed loop of believers who learn from real sufferers and then go on to produce more believers. This phenomenon might also be extended to include the huge increase in the number of alien abductees in the US, who shape their neuroses and fantasies in the form of narratives learnt from fictional abductions and the imaginary abduction stories of others.

The overall result of this is an extraordinary diffusion and dissemination and mongrelization of therapy stories, as patients live out the confusions, paranoias, or threats of the moment. In this way the exponential rise of these symptoms can be seen less as a dysfunctional epidemic, or evidence of widespread irrationality, but, in accordance with a post-Freudian definition of hysteria, as an oblique form of communication, and therefore, as Elaine Showalter has argued, as a "cultural symptom of anxiety and stress".[260] Hysterical syndromes, therefore, are not marginal and prone to appear in the weak and feeble, but are part of everyday

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[260] Showalter, ibid, p9

experience. Their increase gives an indication of rising levels of internalized fear and crisis. Accordingly, hysteria is a mimetic disorder, in which the individual ventriloquizes culturally acceptable expressions of distress. This is why patients increasingly present their symptoms in the way therapists define them as this allows the patient to give a legitimate or accultured voice to feelings of anxiety. This process of iatrogenesis, though, is rarely seen as a crucible of story-making in the new therapy culture itself, because hysteria as a cultural phenomenon is invariably subsumed under the rubric of 'self help' and personal redemption. These symptoms of hysteria are thus detached severed from any examination of the wider social forces that shape and sustain their and diversification.

Iatrogenesis, then, is a suggestive way of accounting for how the narrativization of anxiety in our culture is produced. For it allows us to see the production and reception of Dickinson's crop-circles as being closely modelled on the process of co-dependence. As with the relationship between the hysteric and analyst, the condition (the phenomenon) is created out of the interaction between the doctor (artist) and the patient (believer). The artist recruits the 'true-believer' by providing a setting in which preexisting expectations can be confirmed. These expectations then take the form of speculations and hypotheses which then produce the need for the crop-circles themselves. If this process is, as I have said, not ironic, neither then is it cynical. Dickinson is not interested in how easily people are duped, but in how far the irrational is embedded in modernity, and, therefore, in how normative these processes of co-dependency are in a culture whose claims to reason and enlightenment are held to be self-evident.

This places Dickinson's work self-consciously within a particular post-Freudian tradition of engagement with the irrational and ideological. Until Gramsci, and later Adorno and Horkheimer, Marxist debates on ideology - derived largely from a very partial reading of Marx's and Engels' *The German Ideology* - equated the irrational with 'false consciousness' with ideas that were insensible and

chimerical and opposed to the long-term interests of the subject. But by the 1930s, with developments in psychoanalysis and a greater social understanding of consciousness as conflictual and divided, the idea of ideology as an opaque veil increasingly came under critical scrutiny. Men and women are not subject to a life of illusion through dominant ideological forces but fight them out in the realm of ideas and representations. This is commonly referred to the 'lived relations' or cultural model of ideology in which ideology is equated with the production and reproduction of everyday practices, forms and ideas. Largely silent on questions of epistemology, it takes as axiomatic Freud's hypothesis that consciousness is opaque to its own workings and social effects, arguing that the ideological production and reproduction of everyday practices, forms and idea is subject to a fundamental process of misrecognition. It is this 'open' approach to ideology that is found both in Althusser's reworking of Freud in the 1960s and Adorno's reworking of Freud in the 1940s and 1950s. The workings of ideology, should not be understood in terms of falsification, but in terms of the encoding of suppressed needs, wants and desires. In this respect there is a significant shift in the understanding of the relationship between reason and rationality; although ideologies may contain or promote falsehoods, this is not necessarily an irrational process. Such ideologies may express real needs and desires, and as such create and promote legitimate pleasures. It is this model that has now come to dominate current debates on ideology and the irrational, particularly in the work of Slavoj Zizek, who seeks to close down the gap between ideology and reality.[261] That is, if ideology is not an illusion, neither is it simply a place where ideas get fought out, but a phantasmagoric support for reality itself. Ideology is co-extensive and co-present with the operations of fantasy. In effect this is Althusser driven into the arms of what Zizek calls the surplus of enjoyment played out in ideological investments (nationalism being the main empirical concern in Zizek's later writings).

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[261] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso 1989

Without doubt there are substantive problems with the 'open' model of ideology. By diminishing the idea of false consciousness and the demands of epistemology we would not recognize the 'enjoyments' of ideology in the first place - nevertheless this 'open' model allows us to think the irrational rationalistically. That is it allows us to move - as Showalter does in her analysis of modern hysteria, and as Adorno does, in his discussion of astrology in the 1950s - to a position where the discussion of the irrational is immanent to the everyday, rather than its aberrant other. As Adorno says in his analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column 'The Stars Down to Earth (1952-3), irrational beliefs may "result from the processes of rational self-preservation". [262] Thus astrology, for Adorno, contains a pseudo-rational advocacy of human agency, despite its overarching subsumption of human behaviour under the benign and not so benign influence of the planets. Indeed, this is the very success of astrology, for without this minimal "encouragement of people to take decisions" [263] for themselves, the readers would derive little narcissistic gratification from its entreaties. Hence, under conditions of mass representative democracy, people may feel that they have little power, but they certainly do not want to be told so. Cannily, then, astrology invokes the Fates whilst stepping back from a crude fatalism. This core of the 'rational' is, of course, the work of the astrologist, who carefully appeals to the problems and disappointments of its readers, without demeaning them as victims. In this, Adorno argues, there is a deeper set of instincts at play, which focus on how and why the irrational remains functional under modernity. The

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[262] Theodor Adorno, 'The Stars Down To Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column', in Theodor Adorno, ed. Stephen Crook, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, Routledge, 1994, p34. In the 1950s Carl Jung also became interested in modern manifestations of the paranormal. See *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* (1959), Ark, 1977. Jung's description of UFO sightings as "visionary rumours" is built on a conservative view of the psyche as the repression of the mythic unconscious. The sightings become compensatory projections of 'spiritual wholeness'.

[263] Adorno, 'The Stars Down to Earth', p44

irrational is what Freud calls a residue of prehistorical animalistic practices, which, in a culture where such gratifications are held in check by the powerful social reinforcement of ego controls, release a host of repressed affective and emotional needs. But this dependency is never strictly what it seems, because it can only enact its disavowals of reason, science and materialism via an acknowledgement of the benefits (of at least some) of science's secular developments. The result is what Adorno describes as a form of bi-phasic dissonance, in which the subject believes something in spite of overwhelming counter-evidence because there is good reason to believe it - because it is 'good for me'. Indeed, it is possible to go one step further and note the development of what Peter Sloterdijk calls 'enlightened false consciousness', openly cynical defences of contradiction.[264] "I may accept the advances of science, celebrate them even, but I defend astrology, because it's a laugh". Adorno himself barely considers this as a possibility in his analysis of the *LA Times* readership. This certainly has something to do with the limitations of his method - he assumes a homogeneity of response to the *LA Times* column - but it also reflects the limited self-conscious expression of this cynicism during the period he was writing. Today 'enlightened false consciousness' - after the defeats of the left and the commodification of 1960s counterculture - is the dominant ideology of the new middle class. Blairism incarnate. "I may believe in free education for all, but I will send my children to private school anyway".

Dickinson's crop-circles are a product of and response to these ideological conditions, and, as such, it is through the operations of iatrogenesis that they stage their primary forms of dependency. His work, therefore, goes to the heart of a bi-phasic tension between the irrational and rational within late capitalism. For what his work is also concerned to draw out is the huge intellectual and affective investment made on the part of the crop-circle writers in the lore and mythology

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[264] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Verso, 1988

of the crop-circles *through the work of science itself.* For all the implausibility of their hypotheses, the Cerealogists use the procedures of scientific field-work and analysis to 'verify' their findings. The result is a disarming paradox: the truth of the circles may, ultimately, be inexplicable to human reason, but nonetheless it is human reason which will eventually prove this. In this respect the full implication of Dickinson's work in revealed only with the presentation of the literature and photo-documentation of the crop-circles in the gallery - articles are taken directly from the crop-circle and occult magazines and exhibited on notice boards along with photographs bought form professional crop-circle photographers. As a result the sheer profusion of this material provides an immediate visual fix on how extensive is the network of 'scientific' analysts and helpers. Would-be professional scientists and amateurs rub shoulders together. This activity may be pseudo-science, or 'semi-erudition' as Adorno might put it,[265] but the extent to which it produces a culture of believers, is, as with the effects of astrology, evidence of that surplus of enjoyment which the mechanisms of ideology enact. It would at the same time be foolish, therefore, to assume that Dickinson does not recognize the attractions of this enjoyment, for in producing the crop-circles he also recognizes his own pleasure in the production of the enjoyment of others. With this Dickinson is not out to shame his interlocutors - even if this might seem the inevitable outcome - but to show how the pleasures of the irrational produce their 'rational' effects culturally, for Dickson's work reveals a complicity with the irrational as the means by which the power of the irrational can be made manifest.

In these terms his work is distinguished by its extension and reworking a much older tradition of artistic engagement with the irrational and the rational: the late-nineteenth-century practice of using photographic to fake paranormal manifestations. In fact, if Dickinson's crop-circles openly identify with their

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[265] Adorno, 'The Stars Down To Earth, p119

hidden amateur status, his general subterfuge and game-playing, identifies his art as part of a wider amateur tradition of artist-tricksters working on the edges of science. This is the artist as illusionist and mountebank, who - in applying new technologies and optics via popular forms of entertainment - is able to produce complex illusions in the interests of a 'science' of the paranormal. Indeed, with the advent by the end of the nineteenth century of the telegraph, the telephone and photography - technologies characterized by their embodiment of the invisible - it was believed that the 'spirit world' existed in a parallel universe. Moreover, it was believed that with the right equipment and through the hypersensitive senses of a gifted medium, communications channels could be opened up with that world. As the new technologies became the harbingers of the 'spiritual life' for believers, the technologies in turn were employed by illusionists to create a world that was said to exist just beyond the everyday senses.[266]

From the 1860s in Europe and the USA there emerged a professional photography of staged apparitions, in which the photographer, the scientist and the female medium - who acted as the embodiment of the spirits - colluded in the production of photographic documentation of things and persons from 'beyond the grave'.[267] Developing out of the Spiritualist movement of the 1840s, photographers employed the positivistic 'truth claims' of the new photography to announce the inexplicable power of photographic technique to render the invisible visible. Ghostly after-images, ectoplasmic clouds and spurts and other expulsive manifestations became the stock-in-trade of this staged photography.

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[266] For a discussion of the telephone and Spiritualism see Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1989

[267] See Tom Gunning, 'Phantom Images and Mode', in ed. Patrice Petro, *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Indiana University Press, 1995. For a discussion of Spiritualism and the early working-class movement, see Logie Barrow, *The Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians 1850-1910*, History Workshop Journal. Routledge, 1986

This generated not only a sizable following of 'true-believers'[268] but a learned Spiritualist literature in which the tricks employed by the photographers (double exposures mainly) were taken at face value. As with contemporary crop-circle literature, a similar picture emerges of the irrational 'reasoned'.

But if this history allows Dickinson to treat his own moves as belonging to a popular tradition of illusions, it also allows us to connect this image of the trickster to its artistic role in modernism.[269] That is, the trickster-as-illusionist takes on a broader critical function once it is attached to the modernist critique of authorship and artistic identity. This is why this tradition is not as marginal as it first appears, for the illusionism of spiritualist manifestations and photography fed directly into early modernism's obsession with the negation of empirical appearances and the rejection of the confusion between the sincerity and the subjectivity of the artist and truth in art. Both Marcel Duchamp and André Breton were fascinated by spiritualist activities and fake spiritual photography, and what this implied for the creation of the 'critical illusion' and the dissolution of the artist as expressive subject. For Breton the seance allowed for the production of the same kind of unconscious 'intelligence' as did automatic writing.[270] But if Dickinson is fascinated by the trickster because of its destablization of artistic

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[268] The popularity of Spiritualism, spiritualist photography and seances, in the second half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century has been described as a 'war widow' phenomenon. With the death of so many young men in so many conflicts and imperialist wars during this period, spiritualism produced a co-dependence between wives and lovers seeking contact with their dead loved ones and the spiritualists, who, compelled by the effects of mass grief, were desperate to assuage these longings.

[269] For a brief discussion of the trickster as artist, see Rod Dickinson, 'It's Art for Folk's Sake', *Fortean Times*, January 1998

[270] See, André Breton, 'The Automatic Message', in André Breton, Paul Eluard, Philippe Soupault, *The Automatic Message/The Magnetic Fields/The Immaculate Conception*, translated by David Gascoyne, Antony Melville and Jon Graham, and introduced by David Gascoyne and Antony Melville, Atlas 1997. For an interesting anecdotal account of the connections between surrealism and the occult see also, Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, Bloomsbury, 1995

identity, he is not interested in using illusionism as a means of access to the unconscious, or as a way of outwitting his audience. This is where his post-Freudian trickster meets the demands of post-conceptual art practice. Dickinson's faking of the paranormal identifies his trickster not just as an *illusionist*, as someone whose principle interest is in prestidigitation, but as a *corrupting presence* within preexisting value systems.

In this respect, the idea of the post-conceptual trickster as a corrupting presence is not strictly the same as Duchamp's ironist or Breton's lover of dissemblance, although both artists use surrogate forms of production (the found object) to corrupt the idea that the artist is self-identical with his or her art. The post-conceptual trickster, however, is far closer to the surrogate artist Hank Herron, the imaginary Frank Stella-like artist immortalized in Gregory Battock's *Idea Art* in 1973.[271] For after Conceptual art, one of the possible critical functions of the artist is the self-conscious dramatization of his or her own commodification and social marginality, turning the modernist confrontation with the administrative power of the modern art institution and the culture industry into a simulation and staging of their processes and effects. Herron's author provides, perhaps, an interesting corollary for the ambitions of Dickinson's trickster.

Hank Herron was a fake, but through the article in *Idea Art* his work entered the public discourse of post-minimalism, and therefore took on an extended life, fuelling the rumour that Herron was based on a living artist. Thus, despite the uncertainty over Herron's existence, Herron's 'virtual work' and 'virtual biography' continue as historical events. As an extant text the 'virtuality' of Herron's authorship is transformed into a first-order theoretical practice which is able to generate further theoretical work. In this sense, where does the identity of the author of the essay and Hank Herron's 'authorship' begin and end? Herron's

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[271] Cheryl Bernstein, 'The Fake as More', in ed. Gregory Battock *Idea Art*, Dutton, New York, 1973

work may have been invented by a pseudonymous writer (or two writers writing under a single fictional name as it happens), but it continues to have meaning as the imaginary/critical practice of the two authors. An imaginary set of artworks are no less able to produce discursive effects in the world, than a set of actual and displayable works. Dickinson's crop-circles are not faked in this sense, he is not trying to disguise his authorship behind a pseudonym or claim to do have done something he hasn't done. We know Dickinson to exist as the (co-)maker of the crop-circles. But like the producer of Herron's imaginary paintings his clandestine authorship nevertheless establishes an ambiguous relationship between the art, the name and origins of its author and the work's reception. For those who read the crop-circles as art, Dickinson's authorship is a non-contentious possibility, given knowledge of the history of crop-circle making in Britain in the 1990s. The majority of his non-art world audience, however, who do not read the work as art or anything like it, openly dispute his authorship. This leaves the reception of the work in a critically unstable position between two different publics. Dickinson's post-conceptual trickster is corrupting, then, precisely because his ambiguous identity as an artist stemming from the production of the crop-circles, allows him to penetrate the processes of modern mythology 'under cover'. The clandestine authorship is transformed into an objective, disruptive force outside its initial conditions of production, which means ultimately outside his artistic control.

In this way Dickinson's crop-circles and fake UFO photographs function essentially as a kind of virus within the belief systems of the Cerealogists. By dint of their extraordinary success as icons for believers, the revealed 'uncertainty' of their origins remains a troublesome anomaly, reflected in the literature's constant return to the threat of the 'hoax'. And, in turn, this is where the post-Freudian trickster meets up with situational aesthetics. What is of primary concern for Dickinson is how the production of the crop-circles, and their representation in the Cerealogist literature and media, provides us with a knowledge of the

irrational immanent in everyday life *through* a participation in its processes.

Situational aesthetics broadly can be defined as those practices which exclude the authorial presence of the artist from the exhibition space, or deflate the notion of the artist's autonomy. Derived from both Situationism's and Conceptualism's defence of art as a site-specific intervention, it views the artwork as disruption in a preexisting extra-artistic or artistic field of reference. This might take the form of the artist producing a work in conflict or tension with the social context in which it is seen. In this way, we might describe Michael Asher's and Hans Haacke's museum installations of the 1970s and 1980s as situational: above all else they promote the idea of the artist as a monteur of preexisting elements derived from the administrative functions, cultural identity and architecture of the institution, which through juxtaposition and superimposition, expose the liberal 'neutrality' of the museum in the museum. [272]

One of the characteristics of situational aesthetics is an emphasis on reading interrelationally from one element to another, from one context to another (from the artistic to the extra-artistic, from the extra-artistic to the artistic). The modes of attention employed are inevitably discursive and interrogative. In this respect, Dickinson's non-linear presentation of his photo-documentation and crop-circle

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[272] In the case of Asher this takes the form of the serialized presentation of items taken from the museum itself, as for example in his 1991 Pompidou show where he removed all the page markers from books in the psychology section of the museum's Bibliotheque Publique into the contemporary galleries. After the exhibition the elements are dispersed or destroyed, preventing the installation from yielding any exchange value. In Haacke's work the serialized presentation of photographs and texts on subjects bear directly on the corporate interests of the institution in which the work is being shown. These function dissonantly as a reminder of the speciousness of the art institution's claims to autonomy and as a would-be challenge to the 'comforts' of aesthetic contemplation, as in the Shapolsky real estate series (1971). In Haacke's case, however, the sequence of photographs and texts exist as discrete works for further exhibition and sale. See Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, ed. Benjamin H.Buchloh NSCAD Press, Halifax, 1983, and *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York 1986. For a discussion of their work see Claude Gintz, 'Michael Asher and the Transformation of "Situational Aesthetics"', *October* no. 66. Fall 1993

literature, along with video material of the crop-circles, drawings and web-sites, recognizes the value of this legacy. By making montages of predetermined, non-authored elements, 'author's meaning' is subordinate to social meaning. The demands of reading (and listening) take precedence over matters of aesthetic judgement. But what makes this process in Dickinson's work very different from the museum-oriented version of this paradigm is the voice of the trickster itself. Dickinson's 'situational' voice is that of someone who is self-consciously complicit in the production of the ideological processes in which the work is embedded. He provides, therefore, a set of motivations and cultural references for a discussion of cultural division, commodification, ideology and the art institution which are rarely encountered in the 'critically transparent' museum installations of post-conceptual art in the 1980s.

As an artist who is interested in far more than the critique of the conventional 'exhibition code', Dickinson's use of the trickster-illusionist presents a picture of someone trying to work through some of the problems of 1980s museum-based situational aesthetics. For the situational aesthetics of museum-artists, such as Asher and Haacke, have not escaped the idealist legacy of post-conceptualism's anti-institutional critique: the conflation of social transformation with the transformation of modes of exhibition and spectatorship. In the 1980s such strategies achieved a certain amount of critical prominence, as the art institution came under attack, this time from critical postmodern theory. The outcome, however, has been the incorporation of this anti-aesthetic modes of exhibition display into the postmodern transformation of the museum itself. In short, such efforts at 'internal critique' have been easily brought into line with the new managerial radicalism of the late 1980s and 1990s, Situational aesthetics, or site-specific practice, has become the house style of the new postmodern museum. For a new generation of artists, therefore, who compare the corresponding critical claims of the work with its radical success, the critical value and aesthetic goals of museum-based situational strategies have appeared disappointing and

problematic. Indeed, most critiques of the 'exhibition code' from within the museum itself have seemed limply virtuous, part of a cultural politics that has become as bureaucratically self-administering as the institutions themselves.

Dickinson's adoption of the trickster-illusionist is not a solution to these problems. But by adopting the role of the trickster as critical illusionist Dickinson is able to perform the effects of cultural division and modern myth from within the confines of popular culture and popular 'science' itself, rather than simply announce the consequences of their effects for a museum or gallery going audience. If this in turn produces an interesting set of problems for the true-believer visitor to the crop-circles and the reader of paranormal literature, it also sets up an interesting viewing relationship for the sceptic and true-believer alike in the gallery and museum; the gallery viewers are presented with a complex array of documentary and scientific materials which have already been mediated culturally as the 'paranormal'. In other words, before the crop-circles enter the gallery as art their value has already been established by the media as 'inexplicable phenomena'. The result is that the acceptance or rejection of the mythological content of the materials is dependent on a primary process of mediation before their mediation as art. The spectator's relationship to the phenomenon is already sensitized, therefore, to the power of the media in this mythological process, insofar as the mainstream press and TV conspires with 'true-believer' culture in the interests of ratings and popular appeal. By faking paranormal phenomena and owning up, Dickinson appropriates this power. He thereby produces the viewing conditions for a knowledge of the irrational in the everyday out of the work's own necessary collusion with the media.

To simulate the effects of the modern media in the work of art is, of course, nothing novel for art of the 1980s and 1990s. But in Dickinson's work we are given a complex twist, insofar as his practice successfully insinuates itself into the populist agendas of the media as part of a preexisting non-artworld culture.

This allows him to montage the voices of the irrational in the rational and irrational 'reasoned' within the wider ideological setting of mass culture. In the gallery the performative contradictions of modern forms of ideology are themselves performed.

Chapter 12: The Practice of Failure

"What a deep joy there is in making confessions of objective errors"
Gaston Bachelard[273]

In the late 19th century and early 20th century 'memory men' (and they were usually men) were a familiar act on the music hall and vaudeville circuits of Europe and North America. Though many of the acts were clearly scams relying on stooges in the audience to feed prepared questions to the performer, some featured performers who demonstrated, what we call, ordinarily, the power of 'photographic memory'. However, whether an illusion or a prodigious feat, these acts were accorded a huge amount of respect. This is because the performers were appreciated as popular scholars, individuals who were capable of answering what the audience wanted answering: invariably questions on sports, the miracles of nature and the histories of kings and queens and the rich and famous. In this they fulfilled, superficially at least, a similar role to the successful TV quiz winners of today, those who return week after week answering questions on the widest and most arcane subjects, or the person who can recite to order large chunks of the Guiness Book of Records. Both performers and contestants are admired for their spontaneously encyclopaedic knowledge.

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[273] Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, p100. A history of the epistemological status of the error waits to be written both in philosophy and art. Schelling, Hegel, Engels, Wittgenstein, Raoul Vaneigem, Gillian Rose, Niklas Luhmann, and George Dickie are all companions to Bachelard here. "Error or other-being, when superseded, is still a necessary dynamic element of truth: for truth can only be where it makes itself its own result", G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (*The First Part of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*), p212.

But unlike today the Victorian and Edwardian 'memory men' also performed in a culture where the formalization of knowledge was the province, largely, of the educated middle class. As such, for the Victorians and Edwardians the pleasure taken from the 'memory men's' spontaneous demonstration of knowledge, was the pleasure in being able to put questions to an expert without feeling shame for asking the question - even if in principle, the purpose of the entertainment was for the audience to outwit the performer and see him fail. Thus, under earlier conditions of mass illiteracy a significant part of the working-class's pleasure in watching memory men perform their prodigious arts was based on being in the presence of a knowledge that felt attainable, amenable, inclusive. Today, impressive acts of memory are certainly admired, but in the same way jugglers are 'admired' as a skill that astonishes through its dexterity, but nevertheless is viewed, ultimately, as being a skill without purpose, and therefore of abstruse value only. This cynical response is not because the popular arts of memory have become any less popular. [274] Working class autodidactism, as it gets played out in sports knowledge - lists, tables, dates - remains formidably extensive. But, rather, because of the way acts of human memory have been displaced by the ubiquitous and fast memory of machines. The exponential increase in computer memory has left human acts of memory trailing embarrassingly behind. Indeed, new technology has exposed how feeble human memory actually is even at its most careful and assiduous. The human brain is not designed to recover large amounts information at will. Rather, what the human brain has proved to be efficient at is the creative and contextual application of knowledge, a set of skills at which computers are dismally poor. As Paul Churchland observes: "Ask us to add a column of random four-digit numbers a column thirty numbers high, and ten minutes later we will present the wrong answer at least half the time. A classical computer, on the other other hand, will get it right every time, and in less than

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[274] There are still still many organized memory championships. The 2001 World Memory Championsip were held in London on 25-26 August 2001.

milliseconds. The shoe is on the other foot, however, if the development of new mathematical concepts and the achievement of fundamental mathematical insights are the skills at issue. Hence it is the human who seems to have the deeper capacity. . ."[275] In this regard what computers have eliminated is the popular magical function of the (limited) arts of memory that the early music hall celebrated; no human act of memory today can come anywhere near in its speed or depth to the instantaneous recall of the search engine or the detail of the in-car navigational system. Now, obviously the erosion of oral systems of knowledge transmission is not solely the result of computer efficiency. Since the invention of the book and various technological developments in the recording of data and indexing, humans have been able to separate the storage of knowledge from its oral dissemination, widening the conditions of who produces and who 'owns' knowledge. With the routinization of knowledge through the use of the written document, knowledge becomes a shared entitlement (for those who could read and write), rather than a cultic experience. But with the advance of computers and the expansion of the sciences the separation between storage and use has widened to unprecedented levels. One of the consequences of this is that what is treated, in philosophical terms, as the fallible relationship between human memory and knowledge is now taken, on a social scale, to be irrevocable: memory fails absolutely because humans are simply unable to both digest the vast quantities of readily available information and compete with the computer's forbidding powers of organization; the interrelation between knowledge and memory has become, therefore, not just a problem of extensity and quantitity - as it always has been under a complex division of intellectual labour - but of the stark visibility of

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[275] Paul M.Chuchland, *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain*, MIT, 1995 p249. See also *On the Contrary: Critical Essays, 1987-1997*, MIT, 1998. The cognitive slowness of the human brain, however, is reversed in the development of an adequate and realistic knowledge base for AI. The computer needs an extraodinarily long period of programming in order for it replicate the most basic 'spontaneous' requirements of human conversation."This relative slowness of the simulations over the real thing was darkly curious; signal propagation in a computer is roughly a million times faster than the brain" (p50). The inability of computers to produce a realistic and relevant knowledge base remains the abiding stumbling block of AI.

memory's impotence. This is why in popular terms the perceived impotence of memory is seen as a crisis of storage capacity: the impotence of memory is gauged on the basis of the mind's cognitive limitations - an updated version of John Locke's theory of consciousness: human cognitive faculties are never quite up to the job of understanding or representing the world.[276] This does not mean, for Locke, that humans are incapable of producing scientific knowledge, but that there are limits to what humans might know, or are able to know, on the basis of humans' physiological limits. In the age of hyper-efficient memory machines, the imputed physiological limits of human consciousness, therefore, is made starkly evident, and as such veils a trauma: the impossibility of the individual's access to and control over knowledge in a world where knowledge no longer appears open to general assimilation and evaluation.

Cultural reflections on cognition, knowledge and memory, however, are rare these days - despite the 'memory industry' and developments in artificial intelligence. Discussions of cognition and memory are usually confined to the philosophy of mind or cognitive psychology. Which is why the English artist Emma Kay's work on cognition, memory and knowledge is particularly engaging, given its artistic context.

Kay's incorporation of various feats of memorization into her art - drawing a map of the world from memory complete with place names, rewriting the Bible and the plots of Shakespeare's plays from memory - clearly recall the braggadocio of the music hall memory men, albeit mediated by the discipline of the junior high school class room. Indeed the powers of recollection on display here are those nominally associated with the school exam and class room recitation. But more pointedly, in the case of her use of the Bible and Shakespeare, they enact a certain

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[276] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged and edited by John W. Yolton, Everyman, 1993. For a Lockean-type update of a theory of consciousness, see Colin McGinn, *The Problem of Consciousness*, Blackwell, 1991

kind of lost or marginal cultural capital in the contemporary world of culture. Familiarity with the Bible in the West (discounting the beliefs and commitments of the religious) has long been an esoteric knowledge, just as the contemporary readership of Shakespeare is largely professional. Thus despite the huge amount of cultural capital still associated with Shakespeare, and particular with the Bible on the grounds of its vast pedagogic influence, popular, attentive readers of these works are relatively few. Kay's acts of memorization, are attuned, therefore, to the social and ideological conditions under which cultural capital and tradition are produced. The Bible and Shakespeare may weigh in with a huge amount of cultural and educational force - state force in fact - but the popular conditions of reception under which the memory of tradition in which such work lives, is diminished and fragmented. Hence there is an obvious gap between what the culture invites people to remember in order to attain cultural and social capital and what people choose to remember or are in a position to remember. Kay's point, though is not that of the cheap cultural studies jibe at high-culture and religious belief. Rather, what preoccupies her, and what interests me, is the conditions under which modernity produces, organizes and derogates memorization. In this her performance from memory of culturally sanctioned texts is concerned more significantly with the occlusion of memory and knowledge generally. For as with our popular user of computers her memory skills are produced out of a deflationary, Lockean sense of human consciousness as inadequate to the command of knowledge. Thus we might marvel, as with our imaginary juggler, at her rendering of the Bible and Shakespeare, but the act itself doesn't compel, it has no social function, it seems to be merely fanciful, the work of a frozen, artificial culture, a dead pedagogy.

In this sense the work involves an intriguing contradiction at the heart of the interrelationship between knowledge and memory: in straining after a purported truthfulness it inevitably demonstrates its own incompetence. The outcome, therefore, is substantively not like the vaudeville 'memory men', because her

appointed task is actually self-defeating and therefore an *enactment* of failure rather than its unconscious or incidental outcome. There is no illusion of exactitude here, even if the demonstration of memory skills remains impressive.

It is wrong to assume, then, that this work is simply an anti-art act of violation against high-cultural norms. Rather, the embrace of the failure of memory is wholly strategized. That is, the limits of memory here are transformed into a post-conceptual act of cognitive closure.

Forms of cognitive closure in art are strategies or acts of artistic self-disablement or self-constraint which test or expose the inherited skills or cognitive competences of dominant or prevailing practices. The character of these forms of cognitive closure can be elastic, but relevant examples might be Dieter Hacker's and Art & Language's 'painting by mouth' (in the 1970s and 1980s respectively), and Vito Acconci's blindfolded and earplugged documentation of his immediate gallery environment in 1971 and Ian McKeever's 'painting in the dark' of the 1980s. The overriding aim of these strategies is to critique or derogate what are perceived to be culturally unproblematic notions of 'expression', 'representation' and 'authorship'. Such strategies of negation, therefore, should should not be confused, for example, with the use of syntactic and alphabetic constraints in the fiction and poems of Oulipo and Georges Perec. These self-imposed demands function as obstacles to be overcome in a display of wit and ingenuity. In this way the notion of cognitive closure has its intellectual and cultural home in the aesthetics of amateurism, rather than in the bravura realms of puzzle solving or game-playing.

As I have argued in this book, amateurism is one of the means by which the deflationary drive of modernism and the avant-garde is embodied. It is the amateur artist - that is the artist who in some sense fails the test of professionalism and 'good' taste - that modernists and avant-gardists have looked

to in order to secure what is anti-bourgeois and anti-aesthetic. Of course the cognitive demands and social conditions of amateurism have changed - the bourgeois audience for art is longer troubled by the performed incompetences of Cézanne, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism - but nevertheless the performance of incompetence remains something that haunts the artworld's continual call to order and identity. Indeed the performance of incompetence is reflected in an enormous amount of contemporary art, in its widespread affection for poor materials and poor workmanship, juvenile symbols and childlike marking, misregistration of forms, bad spelling, camp obsessions and the DIY use of scientific hardware and scientific knowledge. Much of this work, though, does not adopt strategies of incompetence systematically as a cognitive constraint. This is because there is a darkness and deconstructive urge at the heart of the systematic use of cognitive constraint, which a lot of contemporary art is antipathetic to given its confusion of amateurism with a love of loucheness. Kay's use of the failure of memory as a cognitive constraint, then, occupies a different position, it is closer to the notion of constraint as a form of ideological exposure; that is, the notion of the failure of memory becomes a performative contradiction. The incompetence of the activity provides the conditions for critical reflection.

One of Kay's most ambitious works recently is *Worldview* (1999),[277] a narrative written from memory of the history of the world. As an adolescent Jane Austen wrote an unfinished history of the world. Whether in sly homage to this or not, the text performs a similar manic ambition: the would-be narration of all significant events that fall under the description of 'world history' from the origins of civilization circa 4000BC to the New Years eve millennium celebrations. It is claimed that Kay wrote the text without recourse to any study aids, relying solely on what she could remember from her school and university days, TV and general reading. What isn't clear though is whether this primary

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[277] Emma Kay, *Worldview*, Book Works, 1999

process of memorization was supplemented prior to the writing by vast amounts of cramming which she then regurgitated: as if she was a student of a particular megalomaniacal history mastery sitting for a impossibly overarching exam - the mother of all history exams. The issue here, however, isn't about the means by which she actually compiled the text - as if knowing she studied for its execution diminishes our admiration of the performance - but what finds its way into the text, on what terms and and under what assumptions. For this is where the performative work of the text begins to unfold.

Kay has produced a narrative that is compiled unashamedly from received ideas, cliches, obvious mistakes, empirical experience, hearsay, but in a voice that is unswervingly confident about its own claims. The writing has an authoritative relentlessness as it passes from one period, one set of events, and one set of facts to another. But, coextensively, this relentlessness is always subject to a process of interruption and breakdown as Kay's evident lack of knowledge of a given period or event is reduced to few details and inconsequentialities leaving the narrative hanging in the air. In this respect the text is actually desperately boring and unrewarding in the claims for objectivity that it sets itself, as if, in order to signify to the reader the authenticity of her process of memorization the writing had to be untainted by theoretical argument, polemic or stylistic invention. Thus, what is remembered and noted down is written in such a way as to convince the reader that this is a work of laboured recovery, an exacting exercise, and not the underachieving commentary of an expert. Consequently the dullness is a trope; and, as such, functions in the text as a prerequisite of the reader accepting or appreciating the labour of the exercise. Literary invention would only foul up the image of honest amateurism by concealing the frustrating inaccuracy and lack of focus of the process of memorization.

The banality of the text, therefore, is the key to the truth-effects of the memory exercise. By adopting the voice of an earnest compositor of facts, by

incorporating non-sequiturs and jumps in continuity, by excluding any reference to written authorities, by focusing principally on Britain for a large part of the book, the character of the historical narrative is self-evidently that of England-domiciled autodidact. As such the text's 'memory work' is inseparable from its generic and provincial conditions of production. *Worldview* may have ambitions to be a world history, but its voice is clearly overdetermined by what Kay remembers from her education growing up in England in the 1970s and 1980s and what she herself remembers directly from this period. The historical detail gets denser and more expressly national when the narrative coincides with her own biological life span. In this light the book advertises itself as a world historical narrative, but it is actually written in the form of a memoir or diary. The idea that diaries or memoirs possess stronger claims to historical truth is commonplace. Indeed, on the basis that they are privileged sites of the truths of micro-history, the diary and the memoir have become perhaps the most popular genres of historical writing today. But the discrepancy between the localized knowledges of *Worldview* and the world historical ambitions of the writing, means that the local and generic are here revealed as theoretically insufficient to sustain the narrative. Hence by performing the failure of memory Kay exposes the relationality of her authorship and subjectivity and the *limits* of her knowledge, and, therefore, the conditions of her own ideological formation. For in demonstrating the failure of memory as a failure of knowledge the relationship between ideology and knowledge is foregrounded. The failure of memory as a failure of knowledge, then, becomes a means of exposing how historical knowledge is produced out of a shared cultural memory of historical representations over which we have little control. In other words Kay exposes the impotence of memory not just as the result of the limits of cognition, but as the outcome of certain processes of socialisation. This leads to a very different reading of the text's would-be factual content. What appears to be the neutral structure of Kay's powers of memory, becomes in its gradual unfolding, the self-fulfilling liberal democratic ideology of history as a process of progressive self-

enlightenment. Kay's voice becomes the 'balanced' voice of liberal reason.

And it is this which makes *Worldview* particularly intriguing. We are never sure under what basis the failure of memory is taking place. Is Kay's indifference as a historian the actual outcome of the failures of memory and obvious lack of knowledge and theoretical reflection, or is her lack of knowledge being simulated at certain points in order to emphasis the myth of neutrality? This question is particularly pertinent when we compare Kay's surprising display of early mediaeval historical knowledge - "the best known shrines were at Santiago de Compostela on the route which led from England to Rome"[278] - to her knowledge of modern and ubiquitous media events, such as Kennedy's assassination and the American moon landing. Strikingly she gets the dates of these two events wrong.This is not to say she shouldn't get these dates wrong, but these mistakes look odd against the partial displays of erudition elsewhere in the text. Accordingly, such slips allow the performativity of the writing to be interpreted in two ways: either the book was written fast without much revision, or the finished text was then rewritten with added errors. To discover which path she took is not necessarily to make a value judgement here, but to realise that the display of memory's impotence is not just enacted but actually performed. On this score there is an obvious point to be made about the intertextuality of the historical text, or any other text for that matter: Kay's historical narrative is a convocation of remembered lessons, reported speech, newspaper articles, film dialogue, TV narratives, and books, which are themselves, in turn, the composite remnants of remembered texts. But what is of principal interest about *Worldview* is not that it demonstrates the limits of historical objectivity - as if the whole project was an elaborate post-structuralist exercise - but, to return to my earlier remarks, that it invests an enormous amount of intellectual effort into the demonstration of intellectual failure. All intellectual work in a sense demonstrates

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278 *Worldview*, op cit, p35

this paradox, in some capacity. But this is not something that writers, intellectuals and historians would willingly expose themselves to. It is hard to imagine a scholar, or anyone who takes their intellectual identity seriously, exposing themselves to memory's impotence by publishing a text without recourse to any written aids and citations. In this way *Worldview*, uses the impotence of memory to a field a number of questions about the function of intellectual expertise. One of the few critical functions that artists still possess is their access to modes of negation that deflate the conjunction of power and knowledge. This is because artists can lodge themselves into discourses without any social investment in those discourses. No one but an artist could have produced *Worldview*, because no one but an artist would have wanted to expose themselves to its intellectual embarrassments. Thus Kay's reworking of the notion of the amateur or autodidact is a reconfirmation of the deflationary powers of the artist. That is, artists must of necessity makes themselves masters of 'failure' in a culture where the truths of the dominant and powerful perform an inflationary ideological role of triumphant elucidation (*Aufklärung*). In this sense Kay's employment of the impotence of memory as a cognitive constraint on her art can be seen as related, indirectly, to the politicization of a post-Freudian psychoanalysis. By recognizing the failure of memory as an acceptance of insufficiency we are able to confront the problem of knowledge as a comedy of critical struggle, rather than a tragedy of imperfect realisation.

In this I detect a critical tension at play in Kay's recourse to memorization. As I have outlined, Kay's engagement with memorization seems inseparable from the trauma of knowledge. On one level her employment of the impotence of memory is a direct response to complexities of the contemporary division of intellectual labour and the power of intelligence machines. In her performance of failure - as in other contemporary art - there is flight from the symbols of formalised knowledge. This is her 'Lockean' voice. But hidden in the performance of the failure of knowledge, and the deflation of knowledge's triumphant elucidation, is

a different understanding of pedagogy, one in which error is grounded in reason. If claims to knowledge could only be made where there was no possibility of error, communication between humans would become inconceivable. Yet the possibility of error is used, invariably, by those with intellectual power and authority to silence or subordinate those without such authority and power. The fear of a making a mistake, of showing up one's lack of knowledge, is one of the most powerful determinates of daily conversation, with its evasions, platitudes, and alienated civilities. This is because the sense of social exclusion experienced by those who do not pursue critical or theoretical knowledge is minimal compared to those who do try and fail.[279] "I am not interested", " I don't want to know," or, "that's boring", are invariably the self-protective responses of someone who knows the penalty and does not want to be humiliated. The shame attributed to the possibility of error is a powerful servant, therefore, of bourgeois ideologies of 'spontaneous knowledge'. As such the fear of error is a means of socialising people out of certain critical intellectual skills into an acceptance of prevailing anti-intellectual and conformist ideologies. Recognising the intimacy between the pursuit of knowledge and the acceptance and acknowledgement of error can be liberating, therefore, in so far as it can expose the linguistic and ideological self-protection that dominates everyday discourse and exchange. This in turns means addressing ourselves to something that Jacques Rancière has pursued in his extensive writing on working-class autodidacticism : there is no *hierarchy* of intellectual capacity that says who, or who is not, capable of the pursuit of knowledge."There is inequality in the *manifestation* of intelligence, according to the greater or lesser energy communicated to the intelligence by the will for discovery and combining new relations; but there is no hierarchy of intellectual *capacity*. Emancipation is becoming conscious of this equality of *nature*."[280] In other words, the pursuit of knowledge is not simply an aquaintance

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[279] See Trevor Pateman, *Language, Truth & Politics: Towards a radical theory for communication*, Jean Stroud, 1975

[280] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant School Master: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, translated, with an Introduction by Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press.

with ideas, but is an attribute of practice, even if practice leads to error and failure, as it surely will. On this basis we should all try writing a history of the world from memory.

1991, p27

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